

SIGNIFICANT LITTLE WRECKS:  
Lorine Niedecker, George Oppen, & the Question of 'Small Poetry'  
in Twentieth-Century American Writing

by

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Abstract:

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Certainly a great deal of critical attention has been paid to collage and disjunction in experimental poetry; likewise, there are valuable discussions of poetic brevity and concision. But there is not yet sufficient work on how the conjunction of these two features constitutes a unique poetic strain, a sort of “genus”: spare, damaged groups of words posited as page-contained, emphatically material, readable objects.

In this study I argue that there is indeed such a poetic type in twentieth-century American poetry, that it is mainly characterized not by lyric criteria (of voice and subjectivity) or mere size (“short” poems) but by an emblematic use of form, and thus that the significances of this type can best be drawn out through a textual-semiotic approach to the relevant words, pages, and books. I explore a notion of form that entails both the material qualities embodied in these words, pages, and books, and also, much more narrowly, the exclusive potential in constructed things or objects to function as conceptual shells, totem-like vehicles that can figure accretions of ideas, feelings, and associations.

Though the study of experimental poetry has regularly made use of semiotics, it has relied almost exclusively on the work of Saussure, neglecting the rich earlier work of thinkers like the American Philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. In my dissertation I use Peirce’s semiotics to help construct a theory of “small poems” in America, focusing on the works of

Lorine Niedecker and George Oppen, and, continuing into the present moment, Susan Howe and Myung Mi Kim. The written output of all four poets is almost exclusively limited to disjunctive, spare, page-bound verses. In response to the enveloping, relentless violence and upheaval of modern experience, both before and after the Second World War, these poets present the irreducible facts of their cryptic hand-marked forms.

According to my reading, a disciplined commitment to small poems constitutes an investment in negative values of refusal, transience, and inscrutability—what Theodor Adorno calls “barbaric asceticism in the arts” (*Minima Moralia*)—as means of articulating an emblematic response to twentieth-century violence and superfluity. I also contend that, in spite of these negative postures or gestures, Niedecker, Oppen, Howe, and Kim do not enact the strict Nominalist skepticism about language often claimed for modernist (or “post-modernist”) poetics. Instead, in ways consonant with Peirce’s philosophical Realism, their poems affirm the adequacy of language to human experience by insisting on their own material status as incised documents of witness and as emblems of dissent.

**Acknowledgements:**

Over these past three years, this dissertation has heavily taxed, spun, bewildered, and at several points thwarted me outright. I have never needed nor received so much unflagging support from so many corners. Firstly, I must thank the three professors who, from my first semester at The Graduate Center to the last, stirred my thinking and supported my inquiries most forcefully. Joan Richardson, Ammiel Alcalay, and Wayne Koestenbaum have been (to me and to many others) not only models of uncompromising scholarship but astonishingly generous, attentive teachers; they have been true *guides*, spurring, exhorting, and encouraging me at every point along a sometimes circuitous and rocky six-year course. To Wayne, in particular, my adviser, I owe waves upon waves of gratitude. Throughout and even well-prior to the dissertation, he has supported and supervised my work whole-heartedly and with an absolute reliability. I cannot imagine having finished this project without his wisdom, wit, empathy, and ever-keen attentiveness. Alan Vardy deserves special thanks here for agreeing, at rather late notice, to serve as a reader of this long-winded essay; for his comments on my prospectus some three years back and for his generosity and acuity with my dissertation I am deeply appreciative.

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Two archival forays fed into the heart of this dissertation, and I am deeply grateful to the persons and entities that made this possible. Isaac Gewirtz, director of the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature at the New York Public Library, helped me locate and examine Lorine Niedecker's handmade book *Homemade Poems* in the Berg's collection, a watershed find that corroborated several hypotheses and also spurred me toward finishing this project. Secondly, archive-related thanks go to Karen O'Connor and Kori Oberle at the Hoard Historical Museum's Knox Research Library and Archive in Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin. My visit to Lorine Niedecker's hometown last spring and the time I spent with her papers there were intense, galvanizing experiences. Karen and Kori accommodated me helpfully, efficiently, and kindly.

As ever, I want to express my profound and abiding thanks to my family: my mother, Carrie; my father, Kevin; my sister, Jane; and my new brother-in-law, Tim. Their collective steadfast encouragement has kept me afloat. And finally, with deep joy, I speak the last and most charged word of gratitude to my wife Erin, whose wise, patient, stalwart support has anchored and sustained me day after day and year after year, through countless vicissitudes. This book is for her, and also for our son-or-daughter, soon-to-arrive.

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**Abbreviations:**

<i>BYM</i>	<i>Between Your House and Mine: The Letters of Lorine Niedecker to Cid Corman</i>
<i>CP</i>	<i>The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce</i>
<i>CW</i>	<i>Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works</i>
<i>EP</i>	<i>The Essential Peirce</i>
<i>GOMP</i>	<i>George Oppen: Man and Poet</i>
<i>LNWP</i>	<i>Lorine Niedecker: Woman and Poet</i>
<i>MED</i>	<i>My Emily Dickinson</i>
<i>NCP</i>	<i>George Oppen: New Collected Poems</i>
<i>NG</i>	<i>New Goose</i>
<i>PA</i>	<i>Pierce-Arrow</i>
<i>RV</i>	<i>Radical Vernacular: Lorine Niedecker and the Poetics of Place</i>
<i>S</i>	<i>Singularities</i>
<i>SLT</i>	<i>Souls of the Labadie Tract</i>
<i>SP</i>	<i>George Oppen: Selected Poems</i>
<i>SW</i>	<i>Charles S. Peirce: Selected Writings</i>
<i>TM</i>	<i>The Midnight</i>
<i>TP</i>	<i>The Birth-mark: unsettling the wilderness in American literature</i>

## Chapter One: Small Poems

Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I  
am soulless and heartless? You think wrong — I have as  
much soul as you, — and full as much heart...

(Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*)

The vulnerability of precious things is beautiful because vulnerability is  
a mark of existence. (Simone Weil)

Goes...into language, wounded by and seeking reality  
(Paul Celan)

The small nouns  
crying faith (George Oppen)

Discussions of shorter poems can tend to be mired in reductive arguments for or against a vague notion of “lyric subjectivity” that the poem is alleged to enact or defy. This oppositional rubric and the taxonomic impulse that accompanies it often make quick work of certain small poems that ought to be lingered over. Of course a short poem does not a “lyric” make, nor does any small-scale text possess, ipso facto, the obvious qualities and virtues claimed for it: economy, thrift, tidiness, and precision. Here is a poem, for example, that arguably possesses none of those characteristics:

White. From the  
Under arm of T

The red globe.

Up  
Down. Round  
Shiny fixed  
Alternatives

From the quiet

Stone floor...

There are colors and directional words in the poem, a few nouns, a few adjectives. With one exception, all its words have one or two syllables. Most lines are enjambed. There is no stable

context or narrative, no discoverable self, though the prevalence of prepositions implies an empirical vantage. And what about that “I” that ends line two? Is it the residue of a false start, a truncated version of the word “The” which follows it in line three? Or is it simply what it appears to be, a self-contained capital letter that is also a shape whose “arms” the second line refers to?

The poem is certainly not tidy or precise, and it could only be deemed thrifty in how few total words it employs. Anyone might just as convincingly call it wasteful, extravagant, frivolous—especially if it insists on having an entire page to itself (in both of its original printings, it does indeed). So much unused space! And to what end, such an inscrutable collage of words without paraphrasable form or meaning?

It would not exactly be thrift, for instance, if a man invested time and energy storing his leftover chicken bones in hundreds of discrete plastic containers; or if I traveled out of my way to a yard sale in order to get a great deal on the pocket-sized plastic St. Cyril I had been wanting. True thrift, or “economy” in the connotative sense (as intended in the approval of an “economy of phrase”), implies a shared, stable system of values and then behavior that aligns with those values. Economy concerns use, usefulness, and efficiency; and in general, small experimental works of art declare eschewal of or freedom from such concerns.<sup>1</sup>

The poem reproduced above is an untitled piece from George Oppen’s book *Discrete Series*—a book consisting entirely of thirty-one spare, single-page poems—published in 1934, though the poem *first appeared* (I can’t help but hint at the false ontology suggested by such

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<sup>1</sup> The picture here is of course more complicated, as there also exist aesthetic economies which do not tend to be commensurate with the commodity-driven market economies we usually think of. For instance, one such broad category that will figure here is the economy of gift-giving, or secret-sharing.

commonplace terminology)<sup>2</sup> in the 1931 “*Objectivists*” issue of *Poetry* magazine, edited by Louis Zukofsky. It was also the only poem of Oppen’s included in *An “Objectivist” Anthology* (1932), and as I noted earlier, it boldly and happily occupies its own page there as it does in its *third appearance* two years later. By way of suggesting the long-term persistence of a poetic type, here is a poem that *first appeared* in 2007, seventy-five years after Oppen’s:

Revoke  
 Towering figure  
 Remember  
 Let  
  
 So get this  
 Now  
 Frequency off  
 To Africa<sup>3</sup>

This piece is likewise untitled and constitutes one of a book-length series of similarly spare eight-line, two-stanza, single-page poems. Like Oppen’s poem, the poem above has no clear speaking voice, situation, or referent; instead, the reader is presented with a group of somewhat jarringly discontinuous *lines*, each one capitalized and unpunctuated. Nonetheless, the effect of disjunction and ambiguity is counterpointed by the familiarity of the recurring imperative verbs (“Revoke,” “Remember,” “Let,” and “get”), the colloquial phrase “So get this,” and the “arrival” at a geographical proper noun in the final line.

Are the two quoted works—Oppen’s and Harryman’s—part of a legitimate poetic type or category? If so, what do poems like these *mean*, as a type?

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<sup>2</sup> Does this mean the poem didn’t exist before it “first appeared”? At what point during its writing does a poem become itself, materialize, or appear to the writer? Various arguments about the importance of manuscripts and publishing histories speak to these questions.

<sup>3</sup> Taken from Carla Harryman’s book *Open Box* (58). Belladonna Books, 2007.

In this study I argue that there is indeed such a poetic type in American poetry, that it is mainly characterized not by “lyric” criteria (of voice and subjectivity) or mere size but by an emblematic use of *form*, and thus that the significances of this type can best be drawn out through a textual-semiotic approach to the relevant words, pages, and books. By form I mean both the material qualities embodied in these words, pages, and books, and also, much more narrowly, the exclusive potential in constructed things or objects to function as conceptual shells, totem-like vehicles that can *figure* accretions of ideas, feelings, associations and other meanings.<sup>4</sup>

Poetry of any kind is frequently called to justify itself, to explain what values it purports to deal in or offer, what relation it has, if any, to the *real world*. This is especially true for poetry that is emphatically interested in form but that flatly abjures all set forms and, to boot, many formal and grammatical conventions. Therefore short, experimental texts are perhaps the least “excusable” sort of poems (lacking even the claim to the self-evident values that sumptuous, longer poetic experiments have: inclusion, plurality, polyvocality, progressivity, coverage); and yet this is the type of poem that most unequivocally declares, or simply takes for granted, the extracommunicative, aesthetic value of writing, of *the written*. In addition to Oppen, cited above,

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<sup>4</sup> My notion of form in this dissertation is indebted, in part, to Angus Fletcher’s chapter “The Argument of Form,” from his book *A New Theory For American Poetry* (2004). Fletcher’s theory involves a renovation of “descriptive” poetry, by which he means dynamic verbal responses to the closely observed, felt facts of “common” (daily) experience. Fletcher is not talking about referential, mimetic uses of language, but rather, drawing on pre-Socratic thought, he presents ways that language can be *formed* and animated in commensurate response to the forms, the facts, of experience. Poets recognize, create, and generally traffic in forms as manifestations of active processes in which mind and world interweave; poetic forms are “approximations of an accepting vision of change.” Thus his notion of form, and mine as well, is predominately empiricist and “immanent” (5,28), rather than transcendental, rationalist, or even naturalist. However, as I hope will become clear, such a view is not “anti-metaphysical.” Indeed, for Peirce, Whitehead, and Langer, some metaphysical aspect or element is an indissoluble part of phenomenal experience and thought: form—along with meaning, reality, truths, and beliefs—comes into being concurrently through the mind and through the material world. Neither antecedes or supersedes the other. This processual, immanent view of reality, wherein thought and material world are perpetually transacting business through signs, is what I indicate below when speaking of Peirce’s “semiotic realism.” These philosophical questions will continue to receive attention throughout the present study. I shall also find crucial occasions to return to Fletcher’s *New Theory*, as it contains many other vital theses and suggestions.

Lorine Niedecker, Susan Howe, and Myung Mi Kim, in their forms, but also through consistent practice, enact varieties of an elliptical small poetics that bears significance other than and beyond what has been accorded to it. Reexamining the sign-philosophies of Charles Sanders Peirce and others he influenced, especially Susanne Langer, provides new grounds for adducing such significance in the sphere of experimental poetics.

‘ ‘ ‘

Anyone with a passing knowledge of twentieth-century poetry in America is aware—thanks in part to certain anthologized, Intro-to-Lit chestnuts like Williams’ “The Red Wheelbarrow” and Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro”—that there is no shortage of *short* poems<sup>5</sup> and that these poems, as an undifferentiated group, are allegedly important because of their “imagism,” or “pithiness,” or “concision.” On cursory consideration, their *raison d’être* and consequent status appears to derive easily from a craft-based and potentially capitalist idea of *things produced through precision and reduction*. Other words of orderly natural or mechanical processes extend this idea: small poems are said to be “distilled” or “chiseled” or “crystallized.” Complementing these verbs are frequently invoked descriptive terms like “clear,” “pithy,” or “tidy.” In part, short poems of any sort are glossed this way because they are still predominately found within set forms that dictate distillation and compression in an ordered, categorical manner. Haiku is the most obvious example of a short form (though of course here

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<sup>5</sup> It is telling that “short” is commonly used as a descriptive term for selections or anthologies of poems. For example, see *Great Short Poems* (Ed. Paul Negri, Dover, 2000), *The Oxford Book of Short Poems* (2003), *Short and Sweet: 101 Very Short Poems* (2002), Louis Zukofsky’s *All: The Collected Shorter Poems* (1997), and *The Really Short Poems of A.R. Ammons* (2002). The putative category “short” and the span of each book—from a lifetime to around 400 years, in the anthologies—beg questions: Is “short” an effort at evading the thickets of “lyric”? At what point does a poem strain the category “short” or disqualify itself as too long? And perhaps most importantly, what are the effects, the costs, of piling distinct works from wildly disparate contexts into one heap, as if the mere notion of physical shortness ensured a trans-historical fungibility of the artifact? On a less pedantic note, the use of “short poems” in a book title has something of the blunt sound of marketing strategy—“Take a look at these poems which are *not long*. They will not make demands on you; you will be free to tour among them, choosing and rejecting as you like.”

I am stuck referring to the highly equivocal “haiku” as it has been adopted and translated into the alien conditions of American English). The sonnet is another obvious and longstanding short form. Villanelles aren’t too long, neither are many ballads, and we ought not forget the slews of epitaphs and epigrams—often couplets or quatrains—which could rightly be cited as key examples of a short-poem tradition or class.

In every one of these cases, the form is a preexisting container to be filled, according to certain patterns and regulations—rhyme, meter, syllabic feet, tropes, diction. Short poems that result from and exemplify such requirements will almost necessarily suggest some captured essence or a thing harnessed into crystalline dimensions. There is no disputing that this language, that is, this concept, of short poems is valid to some extent, but it is constraining as a dominant interpretive rubric; it tends too strongly toward reductive or superficial readings of texts that are often quite complex, in both their language and circumstances.

Though many short poems do indeed show evidence of careful reduction and precise presentation of images, my interest in this essay turns away from that pole. Alongside haiku, deft lyrics, and aphoristic couplets, there are a host of small, spare texts like the two presented above that—though they also may *suggest* precision and compression—are patently *untidy*<sup>6</sup> and loose, in spite of their size. Such poems are not unified, translucent baubles but composite, near-opaque shards. In a particular case, the text may be a tiny, fragment-like single object dwarfed by surrounding white space, as is this Olson poem (accorded its own enormous page—9.9” x 6.8”—in, ironically enough, *The Maximus Poems*):

Coiled,  
throughout the system

the jewel

---

<sup>6</sup> See, for a cogent discussion of some kinds of poetic untidiness, James Longenbach’s essay “Untidy Activity,” his title a reference to Elizabeth Bishop’s poem “The Bight.”

in his eye (428)

Or the text may be austere distributed across the page's plane, as in the following Myung Mi

Kim excerpt:

[conjugate]

she, the weeping work

parade of earnings

| | weight of forelegs and hooves under water

a ripple | birched

alyssum <sup>7</sup>

Thus for every given instance—that is, a given page—and over time—from page to page and book to book—these poems use line breaks, disjunction, obliquity, and disfiguration to create emphatically visual-material texts. In this sense, though they are clearly constructed, they appear worn or *damaged*. Thus, such poems are experimental in their forms of language, but—because they imply the effects of an actively resistant world and because they don't forfeit the use of words to *name things* (“weight of forelegs and hooves”, “the jewel // in his eye”); in short, because they seem to believe in *facts* and in the capacity of fractured writing to be commensurate

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<sup>7</sup> From *Penury* (2009).

to a violent world—they also show a responsiveness to particular, ordinary, personal experience.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, these poems demonstrate the relations of both language and experience to a real world of past and present violence, facts both brute and delicate, and to possibilities of transformation. They acknowledge these relations, the potential pain and weight thereof, but also provide—simultaneously, via the page—spaces for taking exception, for rest or retreat.

‘ ‘ ‘

When I speak of the violence that surrounds American writers in the twentieth century, I mean generally a condition of unrelieved confusion and exhaustion punctuated by intermittent catastrophe—wars, riots, disasters natural and civil. I specifically mean the lingering aftermath of the First World War and the devastation of the Great Depression, together the context for Niedecker’s and Oppen’s beginnings; and also the barbaric pageant of the Second World War, which forcefully affected both poets who lived through it (including Niedecker and Oppen, the latter fighting and suffering an injury) as well as those born in its vast wake, like Susan Howe and Myung Mi Kim. In narratives of twentieth-century poetry, in fact, World War II has often been treated as *the* watershed that necessitated “New American Poetries.” Though this is evidently true to a great extent, American poets in the twentieth century, both before and after 1945, have also negotiated destructive forces more subtle and more hidden than those disclosed in outright war. Muriel Rukeyser writes that “American poetry has been part of a culture in conflict” (1). One could immediately point to past violence still haunting American soil—colonial treatment of Native Americans, slavery, the Civil War, industrial exploitation—but Rukeyser incisively calls attention here to the violence on which the success of our economic

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<sup>8</sup> That is, they don’t hesitate to include voice, narrative, affect, and other elements usually associated with an antagonistic (to the avant-garde) “lyric” or confessional mode, what Ron Silliman denominates the “School of Quietude.”

and political operations is dependent: “both include in their basic premise the idea of *perpetual warfare*” (1, emphasis added). Along with the dramatic devastations witnessed by American poets, it is also this unrelenting force of capitalist modernity—the unmitigated, exponential flooding of experience with messages and commodities, and the poverty and injustice such “progress” requires or masks—that has conditioned small poems, induced their damaged quality.

‘ ‘ ‘

Rae Armantrout, a poet whose work fits firmly alongside that of the poets included so far, gave a talk in 1985 called “Poetic Silence” that elegantly characterizes the type of poetry in question here. She begins candidly enough by citing “an aesthetic effect I am attracted by, interested in” which she “felt had something to do with empty space left in a work, or following one, a kind of stoppage, a silence that was a gesture” (31). She later enumerates ways that a writer might “make room in her work for silence, for the experience of cessation.” They are:

1. She may end a line or a poem abruptly, unexpectedly, somehow short of resolution.
2. She may create extremely tenuous connections between parts of a poem.
3. She may deliberately create the effect of inconsequence.
4. She may make use of self-contradiction or retraction.
5. She may use obvious ellipses.
6. She may use anything which places the existent in perceptible relation to the non-existent, the absent or outside. (34-35)<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> It is no neutral or accidental thing that Armantrout uses “she” in the above list, just as three of the four exemplary poets in this study did not merely happen to be women. The significance of gender here is complex but persistent and real; though not a central point of contention in this study, it will, I hope, rise to the surface as

‘ ‘ ‘

For such texts as I and Armantrout have pointed to, wherever they may turn up, and for the committed practice of writing such texts, I propose the utterly frail and ordinary term “small,” thus allowing for the extrapolations “small poems” and “small poetry.”

‘ ‘ ‘

“Shortness” implies linear measurement on a ruled stick or a definite time lapse and therefore has a clinical, cold, irrefutable ring. “Smallness,” on the other hand, is irreducibly indefinite and phenomenological; it contains shifting, freighted dimensions of affect and perception. A thing looks small to the eye or feels small in the hand. Or a person intransitively *feels small* himself.

Smallness evokes limitation, transience, contingency, envelopment, and the fact or possibility of hiddenness.

Small poems obscure as much as they clarify.

A small poem is intimate and unnerving in equal, simultaneous measure. It is never reassuring. It “appalls and entices,” as Emily Dickinson said of Melville’s writing.<sup>10</sup>

Small poems are dynamically expressive without ever fulfilling any mandates of expression. They are more signs of *impression* than *expression*.

Small poems *have trouble speaking*. They say little, and *trouble speaking* is central to what little they have to say.

Small poems unapologetically privilege hands and rooms over mouths and vistas.

A small poem deals in *minims* of language, rudiments, though it is not likely to qualify as properly “minimalist.” Without question, though, it is constitutionally opposed to *maxims*.

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things proceed, and I hope to contribute in some indirect way to the work of those who engage such questions in a direct and thoroughgoing way.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in *The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson* (Ed. Martha Dickinson Bianchi, 1974, 80).

A small poem, especially one that sits within a longstanding, dogged commitment to small poetry, is a *type*<sup>11</sup> of refusal. Like Bartleby, the small poem prefers not to, among other things, make much sense, perform industry, or go away.

A small poem is also a *type* of affirmation. It prefers not to reject sense, or to keep quiet altogether. It speaks up, by means of the written, for the significance of the written.

‘ ‘ ‘

Certainly a great deal of critical attention has been paid to collage and disjunction in experimental poetry<sup>12</sup>; likewise, there are valuable discussions of poetic brevity and concision.<sup>13</sup> But there is not yet sufficient work on how the conjunction of these two features constitutes a unique poetic strain, a sort of “genus”: spare, damaged groups of words posited as page-contained, emphatically material, readable objects.

This dissertation will be an attempt to redress these oversights and to confront directly the unprecedented (at least until Emily Dickinson) phenomenon of small poetry in America, which—in its violently compressed, stuttered language, achieved especially through free-verse line breaks and disrupted syntax—stands in a complementary, sometimes even contentious, relation to the long-form, dilating, more patently democratic strain in experimental American

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<sup>11</sup> I emphasize the word “type” in an effort to dislodge it from its degraded common usage as “kind,” a subset of some larger more important thing. By type, I mean rather—echoing Jonathan Edwards and other Puritan practitioners of “typology”—a model, a figure, an embodied sign that effectively corresponds to some other thing or idea, non-hierarchically. “Emblem” or “representation” are close to my meaning, though those words unfortunately have taints of, respectively, rigid symbolism and rigid idealist mimesis.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Peter Quartermain’s *Disjunctive Poetics*, Marjorie Perloff’s *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, among countless other essays and books that treat both the techniques and themes of disruption, collage, and discontinuity in twentieth-century poetry.

<sup>13</sup> See Kristen Blythe Painter’s recent book *Flint On a Bright Stone: A Revolution of Precision and Restraint in American, Russian, and German Modernism* (2006), especially the chapter “The Emergence of Tempered Modernism,” which centers around Imagism. Also, Peter Quartermain overtly addresses scale in the brief essay “Exploring the Mere: A Note on Charles Reznikoff’s Shorter Poems” (in *Disjunctive Poetics*, 1992).

poetry, inaugurated by Whitman.<sup>14</sup> According to my reading, a disciplined commitment to small poems constitutes an investment in negative values of refusal, transience, and inscrutability as means of articulating an emblematic response to twentieth-century violence and superfluity. Paradoxically, through such a poetics, small poems can also carry an implicit, affirmative argument about how writing can not only respond but *correspond* to experience and to the objective world.

My key exemplars of small poetry in twentieth-century America<sup>15</sup> are Lorine Niedecker, who along with George Oppen began writing in the 1930s, amidst the ferment of Objectivism, and continued writing (with a few noteworthy hiatuses) through the '60s; and Susan Howe and Myung Mi Kim, both of whom have been connected to “Language” writing over the past few decades and are still working.<sup>16</sup> Certainly small poems—by my or any other definition—can be

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<sup>14</sup> Incredibly, though, Whitman’s ability to encompass or at least to *say* everything brings him also to small poetry. After this study had been completed, nineteenth-century scholar John Mac Kilgore read it in manuscript form. Afterwards, he excitedly directed me to this passage from Whitman’s “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life,” a hymn of exuberant self-obliteration where, uncannily, Whitman arrives at the very phrase in my title:

You oceans both, I close with you,  
We murmur alike reproachfully rolling sands and drift, knowing not why,  
These little shreds indeed standing for you and me and all.

You friable shore with trails of debris,  
You fish-shaped island, I take what is underfoot,  
What is yours is mine my father.

I too Paumanok,  
I too have bubbled up, floated the measureless float, and been  
wash'd on your shores,  
I too am but a trail of drift and debris,  
I too leave *little wrecks* upon you, you fish-shaped island. (*Leaves of Grass* 218, emphasis added).

<sup>15</sup> Though I am devoting my energies to certain American poets, I hope I have made clear that I see small poems as particular to the twentieth century but not exclusive to the United States. Paul Celan, whom I cite in my epigraph above, is perhaps the most compelling instance of small poetry in Europe, and Michael Hamburger groups him with Johannes Bobrowski (who combined “plainness with mystery...concreteness with universality”) as poets who exemplify “[t]hat ‘extremist’ art...need not take the form of personal confession” (290). Clearly these and other poets might be studied through my rubric. I will particularly look to Celan and to Theodor Adorno, in grappling with the effects of World War II and its aftermath on aesthetics and poetry.

<sup>16</sup> The antecedent relations between Objectivism and “LANGUAGE” writing are well-documented, but some of the quieter, resistant presences in each group have been overshadowed.

found strewn among the works of hundreds of assorted poets; and more pertinently there are some more recognizable masters of the smaller scale who could be centrally featured here—W.C. Williams, H.D., Mina Loy, and Robert Creeley, to name a few obvious figures. Such writers are without question founding poets of the greater form-class I am hypothesizing. For the purposes of this study, though, which argues as much for the significance of *modes and habits* of writing as it does for the significance of excerptable instances of *form* (single, occasional examples), it seems much more productive to focus on lesser-known poets whose commitments to smallness are sustained and absolute. Niedecker, Oppen, Howe, and Kim, throughout their respective oeuvres, consummately manifest a near-exclusive devotion to small, visually-oriented experimental texts (which also risk being derogated as “closed” or “lyrical” in both their candor and page-bound fixity) and a cunning refusal to give full allegiance to avant-garde camps or creeds.

These poets are marginal or buried in different ways, but usually due in large part to their own discretion. So even though they are or have been somewhat obscured from “official verse culture”<sup>17</sup> much more significant as a radical practice of smallness are their various renunciations of outspoken avant-garde authoritativeness, their willingness to seek out a degree of aloofness from “their own kind.” Just as the small poem, as a distinct form, has not received thorough enough attention, neither has the way that that form can accord with a subtle *practice* of semi-withdrawal and preferring not to offer much, if anything, in the way of explanation or justification.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See Charles Bernstein’s *A Poetics* (6) and elsewhere. This marginal situation itself often serves as the key mark of the experimental authenticity one desires or asserts, a sort of shibboleth, as Jed Rasula notes in *The American Poetry Wax Museum*.

<sup>18</sup> I use the modifiers “subtle” and “semi” here to indicate the complexity of the positions negotiated by these four poets. They are by no means recluses or isolationists; quite the opposite is true, in every case. In fact, it is

A section in Michael Davidson’s introduction to George Oppen’s *Collected Poems* is called “Forms of Refusal.” There is probably no phrase more apt than this one—allowing as it does for a strong set of multiple meanings in “Forms”—for encircling the persons and poems featured in my study. Acknowledging what critics like Davidson have acknowledged, I hope to extend, deepen, and ramify our sense of what constitutes said forms, how they work, and what meanings accrue in or around them.

‘ ‘ ‘

I wish in this present work not only to theorize and analyze small poems, but to speak persuasively on their behalf.

I want to write an apologia arrayed in the guise of a handbook, or vice versa.

Forgive the drag of my hopelessly clotted *statements*; in spite of themselves, they only mean to *inquire*.

I wish this present work to be an ode as much as it is a rhetoric.

## **New Theory**

In order to turn such a philosophically vexed argument to account, in the case of each poet and overall, it is necessary to rethink many of the accepted notions and terms that dominate critical discussions of experimental art. For the most part, whether they are considered modernist or postmodernist, poets like Niedecker, Oppen, Howe, and Kim are categorically associated with a “Nominalist” view of language and experience—that is, with the idea that “the characters of objects when known are *only* names for our ideas or opinions about them,” that neither our ideas nor their relations to the material world can be considered real

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precisely by noting their vibrant connections to experimental circles that one is able truly to identify and grasp the poets’ prerogatives in choosing smallness.

(Wiener xii, emphasis added).<sup>19</sup> Even though nominalism is rarely addressed explicitly, the view that experience and especially language are mediations which absolutely *cut us off* from meaning and reality is stubbornly bound up in both Structuralism's and Post-structuralism's total reliance on Saussure's dyadic notion of the sign.<sup>20</sup> A focus on signs is indeed the most profitable approach to aesthetic productions, to texts in particular, but there has been an overreliance in critical theory on one tradition of semiotics, at the almost total neglect of other traditions. In particular, the work of the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce has been unaccountably overlooked. Well before Saussure, in writings that stretch from 1868 to 1914, Peirce developed an intricate, rigorous sign-philosophy which undergirded his fugitive pragmatism, or "pragmatism" as he later referred to his own originating version of the philosophy. For Peirce, all thought and all behavior—collectively, *semiosis*—occurs as and through signs, and thus semiotics is not merely linguistic (as it is, in effect, for all those Structuralist and Post-structuralist inheritors of Saussure); it concerns the ongoing, contextualized relations between "representamen, object, and interpretant" (the basic elements

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<sup>19</sup> Taken from the Introduction to *The Selected Writings of Charles Sanders Peirce*, edited by Philip Wiener.

<sup>20</sup> John Sheriff observes that although many theorists "have recognized the shortcomings of structural linguistics as a model for literary theory and have offered critiques of it...in most cases they do not escape from the basic conception of a sign as dyadic, implications of which Saussure's theory is merely the working out" (xvi). Later, in a synopsis of Derrida's deconstruction of Saussure, he underscores how Structuralism's central dogmas of arbitrariness, dualism, and indeterminacy still dictate and circumscribe "Post-structuralist" semiotics:

Because of this essential structure of difference [a sine qua non condition of Saussure's concept of a sign], what seems to *be* only *seems* to be. What seems to *be* is already signs of signs, but the supplementary character of the signs goes unnoticed. Between the signifier and the signified, the word and the thing, the statement and the meaning, the expression and what is expressed, the representer and the represented, is the space, the gap, where the thing is lost in order to be signified...In language, and hence in experience, everything (including meaning, being, presence) is always already a sign of a sign in a system of signs, that is, *absent*. (Sheriff, *The Fate of Meaning*, 36-37, 38, author's emphasis)

None of this is intended to dispute Derrida's (or Saussure's) arguments—which offer valid descriptions and critiques of Western epistemology, phenomenology, and ontology—but merely to note that Saussure's dyadic idea of the sign is a *particular concept*, and not a proved, vouchsafed *truth* that was suddenly discovered around 1910. We should remember two caveats: firstly, Saussure's semiology and what follows from it are *linguistic* theories and therefore perhaps not sufficient to all sign-types and sign-situations (including, even, certain kinds of literature); and secondly, they are, like any theories, historically contingent, embedded in (and reflective of) particular times and philosophical lineages.

of Peirce's triadic semiotic model) in *any* situation where "meaning" is transmitted or interpreted.<sup>21</sup>

American poetry has yet to come around to the illuminations of thinkers like Peirce, arguably the American philosopher whose ideas have the most dynamic, but least explored, relevance to poetics in general and especially to small poems.<sup>22</sup> Beyond the potential resonance of philosophy and aesthetics, there are definite linkages between Peirce and American poetry that are little-known or neglected. Louis Zukofsky, for instance, was an avid reader of not only Spinoza, Whitehead, and Wittgenstein, but also Peirce, whom Zukofsky considered "one of his intellectual heroes" (Ahearn 188). Joshua Schuster, however, in "Looking at Zukofsky Through Spinozist Glasses," offers this odd disclaimer for neglecting further engagement with Peirce: "ultimately, the pragmatist Peirce resists both affective and poetic potentialities of language" (150). The quotes Schuster brings forward to make his point are cherry-picked, betraying a merely superficial grasp of Peirce's thought as a whole. Zukofsky himself certainly never dismissed Peirce in this way; in fact, he incorporates passages from Peirce and powerfully affirmative appraisals into *Bottom: On Shakespeare*. Even though Peirce did not invest his primary energies in literary criticism or aesthetics, it is simply inaccurate to paint him as unfriendly to or irreconcilable with poetry. There are a many ways to redress the monolithic view taken by Schuster, but one simple passage will suffice to refute its basic premise, an excerpt from Peirce's 1903 lectures, *Pragmatism as a Principle*:

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<sup>21</sup> I offer here only a quick gesture toward meaning, but that ball-of-wax (an apt idiom here, I think) will receive fuller attention later in this chapter.

<sup>22</sup> Works of literary theory that discuss semiotics tend to touch on Peirce, but then usually excuse a more extensive engagement by characterizing the philosopher's writings as too technical or too elaborate for practical use. In varying ways, this somewhat reserved or glancing attention to Peirce can be seen in Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, Kaja Silverman's *The Subject of Semiotics*, Jonathan Culler's *The Pursuit of Signs*, and Johanna Drucker's *The Visible Word*.

The poetic mood approaches the state in which what is present appears as present. Do you find it so abstract and colorless? What an extraordinary idea to say that immediate consciousness is colorless and abstract! (140)

Poet Thom Donovan, a former student of Susan Howe's, relates that Howe once handed him a sheet of paper with this passage typed onto it. Clearly, Peirce thought about and cared deeply for affective and poetic possibilities; it is no wonder, then, that certain poets have been attached to the philosopher, even if these attachments have been forgotten. We find another remarkable and auspicious instance of poet-Peirce connection in Muriel Rukeyser's *The Life of Poetry*, where, in a powerful affirmation of Peirce's bearing on American modernism, she invokes the philosopher in conjunction with Fenollosa:

Charles Peirce takes Fenollosa's lightning flash, sets it away from the giving. Peirce writes: "All dynamical action, or action of brute force, physical or psychical, either takes place between two subjects...or at any rate is a resultant of such actions between pairs." It is important here to understand what Peirce means by *semiosis*. "By semiosis I mean, on the contrary, an action, or influence, which is, or involves, a cooperation of *three* subjects, such as a sign, its object, and its interpretant; this tri-relative influence not being in any way resolvable into actions between pairs..." The giving and taking of a poem is, then, a triadic relation. It can never be reduced to a pair: we are always confronted by the poet, the poem, and the audience. (174)

In addition to his revolutionary thoughts on signs, as noted by Rukeyser, Peirce's writings are full of ideas which can contribute to a new envisaging of small poetic texts. For the moment, a few examples will suffice: Peirce's staunch affirmation of "contrite fallibilism" and

“dissatisfaction” in inferential thinking and experience; his almost mystical ideas about the continuity of mind and matter (“synechism”) and the concentrative, illuminating effects of chance (“tychism”); and, overarchingly, his triadic phenomenology of overlapping firstness, secondness, and thirdness. These ideas and many others are part of a philosophy that, on the whole, is vigorously opposed to strict deterministic materialism<sup>23</sup> and nominalism (the latter he regarded as “baleful”), and thus Peirce’s thought offers a potential foundation for asserting the realist properties of certain texts without having to prove either mimetic fidelity or metaphysical ideals.

American poetry could thus benefit from a rejuvenating, Peircean way of looking at its productions, a new textual-semiotic framework that complements the sometimes too-constrained binaries of the prevalent frameworks (without being at odds with them). In this project, it is precisely by engaging the philosophical semiotics of Peirce’s and those he influenced that I will elaborate a new theory for small poems, contending that poems are *realist* insofar as they are radically direct forms of response to violence-in-the-world, responses that *by* their very form assume that readers will recognize and reciprocally esteem the ingenuous, emblematic responsiveness of such small, carefully fractured texts.

The innovative writings of Niedecker, Oppen, Howe, and Kim certainly employ techniques and craft forms that might be called *nominalistic*—especially if meaning is only held to be bound to a narrow view of semantics—but if their improvisatory language edges into anarchy, it never allies itself to the notion that poetry is relegated to *pure* play. Their language consistently privileges individual things and makes elliptical gestures, but it isn’t properly obscurantist or strictly *individualistic*. Instead, the linguistic violence in the poems intimates

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<sup>23</sup> “Charles Peirce was an enemy of economic individualism. He was also an enemy of determinism. He did not believe that evidence of statistical regularity licensed individual self-interest, and he did not believe that the universe is a machine” (Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club* 195).

damage in a way that can be called realist in its proffered witness of experience to someone, a reader. This is not, of course, a question of literary realism, but rather of philosophical realism as espoused by Peirce: the belief that there are real, shared relations between fellow minds and the things they refer to, interpret, exchange, and name. In this dissertation, I will complicate the monolithic view of disjunctive, experimental poetry as nominalist by pursuing the following hypothesis: Niedecker, Oppen, Howe, and Kim illustrate how austere, disrupted texts enact a realist semiotics even as they evince damage. These texts therefore figure a complex dissent, a repudiation of both America's mass culture extravagances as well as the sometimes bankrupt subjectivism of manifesto-driven experimentation.

‘ ‘ ‘

When I say that the poems of these four writers appear damaged, I mean that they show signs of having been affected by forces beyond the poet's intention: chance, accident, catastrophe, nature, or the State. That is, the poems boldly assume—take on, as mantles—various kinds of *limitation*. Susan Howe writes that Emily Dickinson “audaciously invented a new grammar grounded in humility and hesitation” (21).<sup>24</sup> The disposition of humility and the habit of hesitation are hindrances, even offenses, to almost every stripe of progressive, self-assured American ethos. They are rarely affirmed at all, much less as grounds for poetic innovation, but for small poets the necessity of refusing myths of potency, progress, and bounty presses all the way down into the heart of language, unsettling accepted structures of consciousness and form, and driving poetic experiment.

Louise Glück matter-of-factly observes in “Disruption, Hesitation, Silence” (unsurprisingly, along with Armantrout's talk, a signal instigation for this study) that “the very

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<sup>24</sup> I would also like to add, in affirmation and appreciation, that Susan Howe herself *audaciously* argued on behalf of an Emily Dickinson who was grounded in humility and hesitation.

action of withholding is currently suspect. It is associated with rigidity, miserliness, insufficiencies; with faculties either atrophied or checked” (7). Her statement links small-poem practice to possibilities of small-poem form as I have characterized it. Glück’s essay is most concerned with how the sounds and meanings of certain poems exemplify allegiance to the three conditions her title comprises. She does not give any explicit attention to the poems’ persistent scale or their textual arrangement as pages and books, but in certain phrases like “faculties either atrophied or checked” she intimates the way a poem’s physical form could evoke phenomenological smallness and limitation. Early in the essay, Glück even uses my crucial term, though in a broad, veritably Romantic context: she propounds the power of “the unsaid” in ruins and in other “works of art either damaged or incomplete” (1). To hesitate deliberately with and to withhold words, to assemble small forms that *embody* violence and limitation rather than seeking to oppose or subvert or ironize or overwhelm them, is to subtly but sternly defy almost every prescription for American art in the twentieth century. Near the end of her book on Dickinson, Susan Howe makes an even more piquant claim regarding the “anti-art” thrust of the poet’s deliberately hesitant, damaged pages. Howe writes that Dickinson “means this [poetry] to be an ugly verse” (118). Indeed Howe’s poetry, and Kim’s, in a related way (though not perhaps Oppen’s and Niedecker’s), “mean to be ugly,” and I want to take this thorny aesthetic question seriously. Like Dickinson, each of the poets under consideration construct texts according to these same suspect, indecorous (even scandalous) values, contending through their writings that these values are not poetic compromises or failings—mere weaknesses, lacks, distortions—but viable, deliberately cultivated habits that can drive a conscientious poetics of articulate response to the world. Not incidentally, as I see it, a rigorously hesitating but persistent realist poetics accords with Peirce’s conviction that inquiry—a semiotic process—

ought to be governed by “contrite fallibilism.”<sup>25</sup> For Peirce, effective inquiry is rooted in a conviction that the individual, by herself, is entrenched in ignorance and error. Good inquiry proceeds according to the irritations of dissatisfaction, novelty, and real doubt, but nonetheless results in verbal representations that have veracity when shared and corroborated within a community of sign-users.

Though there is some scholarly work on Peirce and poetry—most noteworthy, for this discussion, is Susan Howe’s Peirce-haunted book of prose and verse, *Pierce-Arrow* (the title, which explicitly alludes to the car manufacturer, is a play on the frequently mispronounced and misspelled name of the philosopher, around whom Howe’s book is centered), an instigating “sign” for my project—no study has brought Peirce to bear on a small-poem poetics as I am delineating it. I hope my dissertation will illuminate a vital, unacknowledged way that poems can be experimental and disjunctive without having to subscribe to a destitute vision of language and experience; I want to show that certain kinds of texts can legitimately operate, according to Wallace Stevens’ axiomatic formulation, as “a violence from within that protects us from a violence without...the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality.”<sup>26</sup> In response to the enveloping, relentless violence and upheaval of modern experience, both before and after the Second World War, Niedecker, Oppen, Howe, and Kim present simply the irreducible facts of their cryptic hand-marked forms; they evince damage as witness to and protest against increasingly damaged forms of life. Thus, even though these poems by definition enact negative gestures of defiance or evasion, they are not anarchic or simply negative, but rather affirm the

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<sup>25</sup> “And indeed the first step toward finding out is to acknowledge you do not satisfactorily know already; so that no blight can so surely arrest all intellectual growth as the blight of cocksureness... Indeed, out of a contrite fallibilism, combined with a high faith in the reality of knowledge, and an intense desire to find things out, all my philosophy has always seemed to me to grow” (*CP* 1.13-14).

<sup>26</sup> From Wallace Stevens’ “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” (665). *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*. New York: Library of America, 1988.

adequacy of language to human experience by insisting on their own material status as incised documents of witness and as emblems of dissent. I will study the ways such exiguous (an apt word, as it carries a latent meaning of “urgency” underneath its denotative sense as “meager” or “small”) forms can be read as repudiations of excess and perfectionism; as miniature but tenacious antagonisms to the American dogmas of the limitless, the whole, the healthy, and the pure, even where those ideals are manifested by the avant-garde.

### **A Vision of the Page**

Even though at present there is no theory exclusively tailored to small poetry, such scholars as Jerome McGann and Michael Davidson<sup>27</sup> have laid the foundations for a theory, rightly focusing on radical uses of the page in experimental poetry. The poems I regard as small are inextricable from their textual embodiment on (and perhaps as) a single page, whether the lines are in typeface on a page of a traditionally bound book or handwritten on a loose square of paper. The fact that small poems exist so saliently as visual, material objects, both page and book, that they are heavily invested in what Pound called “phanopoetic”<sup>28</sup> properties, demands that we consider their significance not mainly as “poems,” but as objects, as *things* that may even have particular ritualistic or talismanic meanings tied to their material forms and uses. Pursuing such small-poem meanings first requires a sufficiently mythic, or say imaginative and phenomenological, vision of the page as a potentially emblematic space. Here is such a vision, from the recent book *Notes on Conceptualisms*, by Vanessa Place and Rob Fitterman:

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<sup>27</sup> In, respectively, *Black Riders: The Visual Language of Modernism* and *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material Word*.

<sup>28</sup> Phanopoeia: “throwing a visual image on the mind” through the form of the writing, the maximum effect of which Pound argues is reached by Chinese poetry; in *ABC of Reading* (37, 52, and elsewhere).

The page is peppered with ink and slatted with white spaces, it can be potted with figural images, for or against the text, blotted with black holes, shouting down the sentences, or blasted with a blank null which might pass for silence. The page is one of some number of pages the reader holds in her hand, and this thickness or thinness provokes sentiment, anticipation or dread. (66)

A poem of any kind is the result of and a participant in various processes, but as this lively passage indicates, it can also be a very evocative physical fact. Seeing the poem as a physical thing does not mean seeing it as fixed, or dead, or static. As *Conceptualism's* Vanessa Place playfully claims, “The lyric, frozen as a shipwreck, testifies to an itch for graphic—not oral—transcendence” (66). The sentence before the one quoted cites “concrete poetry” in a similar regard, and though I am shying away from that term as I am from “lyric,” the putative *itch for—*not accomplishment of—graphic transcendence, as against oral (or philosophical) transcendence, is exactly what small poems intimate more forcefully than any other poetic forms or modes.

The mention of concrete poetry provides an opportunity for an important distinction. Insofar as the term refers simply to the foregrounding of the visual text in poetry, small poems could be considered as a veritable sub-category of concrete poetry. But small poems are mutually exclusive of figural concrete poems, due to the latter’s formal contrivance. Classic examples like George Herbert’s “Easter Wings” or Apollinaire’s “Il Pleut” pictographically figure the things that each poem is *about*. These forms, as forms, are starkly more mimetic and dictatorial than those of a small poem, but a proper concrete poem does helpfully paint broadly the possible effects of visually arranged language, the thrilling fact that physical words can be

arranged into a shape that has a significance in its own right and also perhaps in relation to the semantics in play.<sup>29</sup>

Texts are shaped things and words are unavoidably *words*, that is, they are linguistic symbols (specifically, in Peircean parlance, “legisigns”); they have denotative and connotative meanings that are realized through use. Depending on whether and how they are grammatically arranged, words will be variously evocative and ambiguous or more referential and fixed. A small poem encountered on the page is therefore the site of multiple, interwoven reading operations; the whole is first grasped, visually and tactically, as a form; the words are then read, in some kind of order and perhaps with stalls, recursions, and repetitions; but, as the words are interpreted, the Gestalt form/shape is being *re-read*, gradually imagined anew, as a single collection of plural pieces.

This complex of semantic verbal effects and presentational nonverbal effects is what allows a page of verse to be experienced in the way described above by Place and Fitterman. A poem that is merely heard will not engender such a vision, and neither will an inkblot, or a Mondrian. Only words on a page.

‘ ‘ ‘

Small poets practice a certain sustained, uncompromising use of the page as a self-contained unit of composition, such that “the poem,” the *work*, is only truly equal to the-words-*as-they-appear-arranged* on a particular, material page. A Susan Howe poem, for example, would be

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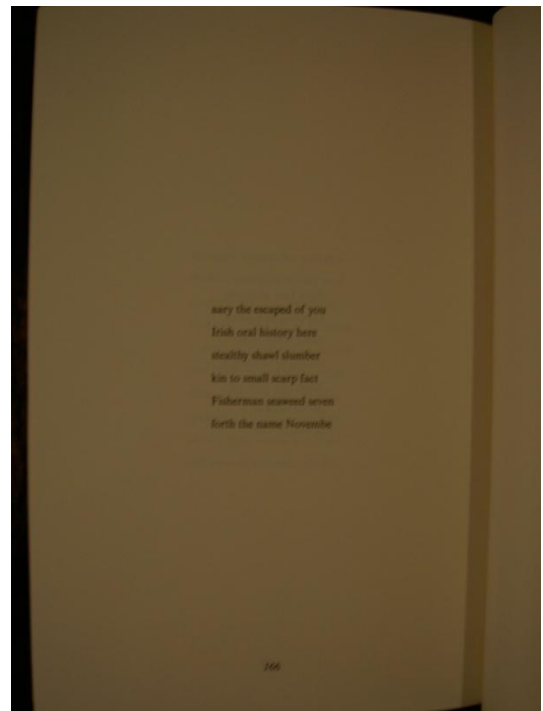
<sup>29</sup> To be clear, just as my approach to small poems rejects the New Critical notion that the “real poem” lurks inside the text as a composite of linguistically encoded meanings, so do I refuse to read a given poem merely as a figural fact that *happens* to consist in letterforms, a sort of pixilated Rorschach image that the reader necessarily finds to resemble some nameable thing. Neither the writer’s act of assembling a shape nor her act of choosing to build it in graphemes and morphemes can be short-shrifted or subordinated to the other.

unjustly represented by merely quoting the words, lineated in the best approximation that can be provided:

aary the escaped of you  
 Irish oral history here  
 stealthy shawl slumber  
 kin to small scarp fact  
 Fisherman seaweed seven  
 forth the name Novembe (166).

The only faithful rendering—alas, the problem of rendition can never be transcended—of Howe’s poem would be to present a facsimile of her *page*, as right:

I use Howe here because she has so convincingly made these same arguments about Dickinson’s page-driven, idiosyncratic works. By training attention on poems as texts, as (originally or primarily) handmade visual-material objects, and without forsaking attention to the contexts that interpenetrate the text, we can begin to understand



small poems as particular material forms that have cultural relations and significance irrespective of their linguistic-semantic meanings or the literary schools and categories to which they seem to belong. By asking about not only denotation, connotation, diction, and syntax, but also spatial configuration, typography, page size, book design, and details regarding publication and

durability, we can piece together a view of small poems outside of some of the constricting categories into which twentieth-century poems often get summarily assigned.<sup>30</sup>

‘ ‘ ‘

My sense of these poems as realist figures of damage and dissent hinges on questions of language’s capacity to incorporate and respond to violence, and that view hinges on a vision of the page as sketched above. Textually, line breaks and the concomitant arranging of lines are the small poem’s primary means of signifying damage. But just as important is the scale of the poems themselves. By appearing spare and diminutive on a page and by ending abruptly, refusing to go on, they seem to have been affected or checked by some outside force. Even within serial constructions—prominent in all four poets—each severed, structural unit bespeaks transience, fragility, and often, epitaph-like grief. Here is one such page-unit, from Lorine Niedecker’s poem “Paean to Place” (which was rendered as a small handmade book, one stanza per page):

ruined  
by the flood  
    Leave the new unbought—  
        all one in the end—  
water (268)

At the same time that they enunciate grief and transience, such gnarled, inscribed assemblages—precisely because they are small—oxymoronically have an object-like intransigence and suggest pleasures of containment. The pages addressed in these (my) pages are thus sites of encounter and relation, realist material signs suited to human use.

‘ ‘ ‘

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<sup>30</sup> Insofar as small poems are distinguished from each other, the grounds and vocabularies relied on are often the convenient ones that sort the (comrade) sheep from the (enemy) goats: conventional and experimental, lyric and un-/anti-/post-lyric, realist and conceptual, artifactual and processual, or, in perhaps the most overused binary face-off, *closed* and *open*. Regarding small poems primarily as realist artifacts (taking care not to commodify them) opens new avenues of interpretation outside the either-or straits.

Does it matter if a small poem spills over, whether across the spine's crevasse or over to the page's backside, onto a second page? Who, after all, decided how the poem would be presented in publication, and can we attribute any significance to the single "page-face" as a deliberate, meaningful *container*? Muriel Rukeyser offers an implicit answer to these questions in a characteristically lucid, simple comment and in a bit of added advice from *The Life of Poetry*:

The images of a poem have so curious a motion. This is certainly more apparent in a short poem—one of the length, say, of 'The Broken Tower,' which can be held easily by the memory or by the page. (It occupies two pages as I have it in print before me; *to scan the full effect*, I suggest you copy it out so that you can have it all on a sheet). (34, emphasis added)

In other words, we might say, a short poem is only truly a small poem, manifesting its full, distinct range of values and effects, when it appears *to* the reader—or is actively consolidated *by* the reader!—as a page-contained entity. No more succinct claim could be made regarding the importance of page to a small text.

## **Little**

I now turn a reflective eye to my title, to the three discrete words that constitute the single phrase, in order to supply one last set of annotations of this investigation's three foremost concepts. "Significant little wrecks" has a convincing cadence and colloquial ring; it might be an offhand, irony-tinged judgment leveled at a child's deliberately mutilated dinner. In the world of verbal aesthetics, though, no such full-fledged, composite evaluation would materialize in an instant. Without reneging on the title's form, which has its own propriety and verve as a phrase, we could better recapitulate this study's aims by looking at the three constituent concepts

rearranged into an intuitive sequence. What I am calling small poems are read, in practice, as “little... wrecked... significances,” because this charts the order whereby empirical apprehension leads into imaginative, interpretive engagement. The encountered text first strikes one as curiously small or spare. Then, upon reading parts or all of it, one thinks “I am a bit taken aback; these words seem strangely transient, like fragments of yet-to-be-realized thoughts, and they are rather violently thrust together in a way that disrupts my familiar way of reading through a poem, even a small one.” Finally, mounted upon and extending from these first two responses are the reader’s conjectured notions of *meaning*, as engendered through reverie or effort: for example, “Why did the writer fashion such a spare, disjunctive text? Does the poem, in its smallness and difficulty, make sense in relation to—perhaps as a response to—the conditions it sits within? What effect is achieved by this clause that ends prematurely and is then followed by an unpunctuated line of four monosyllabic nouns?” And so on.

‘ ‘ ‘

Like “small,” the word “little” is a homely descriptor, and its bouncy, consonant-cluttered sound makes it even less likely than the former to find its way into any kind of serious, adult discourse. Whatever is felt as or deemed to be awkward or childish in its disarray, frailty, and/or littleness is contiguous to small poems, touching them at the point of hand-making.

‘ ‘ ‘

Discussions of poetry are much more likely to involve questions of form than questions of scale. The actual size of a poem, or of a book of poems, or of the words in that book, are certainly *interesting*, but thereby these features are felt to be more deserving of comment than rigorous critical attention. Scale, size, scope, and sheer verbal volume are mere initial, superficial, *coincidental* facts that are noted en route to deeper incidents of style, form, tone, and

import. One could also say that *shape* has been similarly subordinated to, or subsumed within arguments over form, that is, what shape amounts to or means, philosophically. There is, it should be said, a fugitive but rich tradition of engaging shapes, sizes, typefaces, pages, and other textual and material aspects of poetry: Mallarmé's "Un Coup de Dés" and his essays, Pound's notion of phanopoeia, Zukofsky's "Objectivist" writings; and more recently, along with the Davidson and McGann works already mentioned, there are Susan Howe's *My Emily Dickinson*, Barrett Watten's *The Constructivist Moment*, and Johanna Drucker's *The Visible Word* and *Figuring the Word*, to name but a few vital reference points. But, with Howe as the major exception, these studies tend to be most concerned with overarching issues of Modernist poetics and materiality, rarely or only partially addressing size as significant in itself. Furthermore, even though *the page* is acknowledged as a key unit of composition, the emphasis as regards scale skews heavily toward the serial, the expansive, the rampant and unbounded.

Such a predilection is no surprise, since the overarching mythos of modernist and postmodernist revolutions (taking these as continuous, in spite of some claims) is The Open versus The Closed.<sup>31</sup> Works that *rupture* and *spill* beyond containment, poetics that *transgress* boundaries and expectations, are often verbose, maximalist poetics. Or when sparer texts are addressed—since disjunction, the hallmark of twentieth-century experimentation, can operate even in a one-word poem<sup>32</sup>—they are often celebrated for the openness of their ongoing seriality,<sup>33</sup> or the freedom they have exercised in an act of minimalism. Williams' "The Red Wheelbarrow" (1923) comes to mind, or perhaps something like "Oranges," from Stein's *Tender Buttons* (1914): "Build is all right." These writers, like so many of their peers and successors,

<sup>31</sup> Lyn Hejinian's essay "The Rejection of Closure" is a succinct, touchstone text of this opposition.

<sup>32</sup> Consider Aram Saroyan's poem "morni,ng," or, employing a more three-dimensional sort of disjunction, the famously scandalous "lighght," which won an NEA award (both poems are from *Aram Saroyan*, 1968).

<sup>33</sup> Joseph Conte's book *Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry* (1991), where he formulates the often cited typology of a "serial" approach to poetry in relation to a "procedural" approach.

from Pound and Stevens through to Charles Olson and Lyn Hejinian, offer short, small texts as anomalous seasonings or rest stops within larger oeuvres of expansive, word-heavy poetry.

But what about poets who not only wrote small poems here or there, but who *refused* to ever write big, long, wordy poems?

‘ ‘ ‘

Small or little does not equal minimalist, although the two are related and may overlap in a given case. Minimalist art or music realize meditative kinds of spaces precisely by stripping away or prohibiting all figures and symbols. In this sense, then, “minimalist poetry” is nearly a contradiction, as spoken or printed words are the purest example of symbolic, encoded abstractions. When allowances are made, though, for a relative minimalism in language, there are ample instances of deliberately spare word-use, from Stein’s groundbreaking, voluble streams of simplified diction—dramas of pronouns and repetitions with tiny variations—to Aram Saroyan’s readymade-echoing, sometimes mischievous “ultra” minimalist works from the 1960s: one poem reads simply:

coffee

coffee

The text above, which, in its original publication, sits in the center of a full typewriter page, is physically small, but insofar as it does not show any partial or attempted utterance, any arrangement of words into phrases or lines, it doesn’t directly evoke the phenomenological *sense* of smallness that is critical to my argument. Many of Saroyan’s poems do evoke this sense<sup>34</sup> and his “wasteful,” explicit use of the page is a model of small-poem technique, but some of the

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<sup>34</sup> Quite a few of the poems in Saroyan’s aptly titled book *Pages* are plainspoken and referential in their language.

smallest, definitively minimalist pieces for which he is well-known are more visual-verbal riddles than inscribed instances of troubled response to conditions of experience. A poem that runs

eyeye

in its entirety, or

cat  
book  
city

or

ney  
mo  
money<sup>35</sup>

plays with how individual words signify. They have a controlled, gaming quality, in the way of Magritte's paintings or a quirkily pruned Bonsai tree. Their smallness does not especially recall the works of Emily Dickinson or, turning beyond the States to the definitive writer of small poems after the Second World War, the works of Paul Celan.

‘ ‘ ‘

Small or little does not exactly mean miniature, although as with the minimalist poetry cited above, the two are not exclusive of each other. Miniature works of art are the result of *miniaturization*, shrinking an already existing form or figure to tiny, titillating proportions. Susan Stewart's book *On Longing* perspicaciously explicates the workings of desire in the semiotics of the miniature, but she is plainly focused on things that are small because of shrinking; and, just as poems in set forms do not qualify as small poems, miniaturized poems disqualify as small poems because they are still bound to, in reference to, established proportions and conventions.

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<sup>35</sup> Saroyan's poems are plainly typewriter works. Typeface is always important, but here it is especially necessary to attempt a decent approximation of the sort of lettering in which the poems are always embodied.

What might qualify as a poetic miniature? Certain sonnets, certain imagist poems that attempt a “portrait” of a thing, or haiku-like capsules such as Pound’s

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;

Petals on a wet, black bough.

The two lines—each a whole, verb-less descriptive phrase—are perfectly suspended in juxtaposition, the urban against the organic, definite nouns against indefinite ones, the spectral against the concrete. The poem dictates a scene through montage (these could easily be prescriptive notes in an Eisenstein film script!), and packages it for the reader with counterpointed rhythms, a vowel chime at the end-lines, and a deft deployment, at the finish, of sharp monosyllabic words counterpointed by resonant vowels: “wet, black bough.” All of this structure and controlled effect suggests a larger poem that has been rendered down, condensed, into a smaller poem. Indeed, this is what Pound’s lengthy explanatory footnote testifies to.<sup>36</sup>

In art history, “miniatures” are tiny portraits created to showcase dexterous rendering and to provide a particular human likeness that could be carried around, tucked in a pocket or encased in a piece of jewelry. This portability of small works, whatever their form, is a central aspect of small poems; more specifically, I could say that the writing and reading of small poems is intimately, inextricably connected to the human habit of saving and treasuring small objects, investing them with feeling, meaning, and even at times with magical import. But this kind of significance will be treated presently.

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<sup>36</sup> “I wrote a thirty line poem, and destroyed it. . . Six months later I made a poem half that length; a year later I made the following *haiku*-like sentence” (Pound, qtd. in *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*).

## Wrecked

I have been contending that small poems are distinguished, through but also beyond their mere scale, by their air of damage, their manifest “trouble speaking.” A quality of violence, of seeming or being a little *wrecked*, is discernible in two potentially simultaneous aspects of a small poem: its actual words—diction and details that are curiously ordinary, even dull (what Armantrout refers to as a sense of being “inconsequential”); and its arrangement of those words into a visual structure, especially through free-verse line-breaks. In other words, small poems evince violence via some combination of, respectively, their content and their form.

Though I am determined to let the word stand, “wrecks” is perhaps too strong, conjuring as it does spectacles of disaster and the dramatic psychological states that attend them. (Ironically, its vernacular usages—“This room is an absolute *wreck*, young man!”—also make it sound somewhat dismissive or flippant.) I do not want to overemphasize poetry that is overtly tormented or disintegrated. That is one kind of small poem, one model for how damage can be demonstrated; but just as physical damage can be the unspectacular result of years of use or abuse, the attritions of weather, or subtle wear-and-tear, there are quieter, subtler ways that small poems can indicate and contain effects of violence. Such ways are effectively, if obliquely, connoted by the *austerity* that small poems often bring to mind. In any case, the concept of damage in small poems is by nature elusive and overdetermined. It is an idea that is being pursued, raveled out; and I am pursuing it along semiotic and textual lines, not psychoanalytic, sociological, or other lines that center on content, on “subject.”

Accordingly, small poems are not primarily a matter of direct confession or polemical citation. They do not whimper or primarily enumerate pains or speak in an afflicted quaver, nor do they indignantly report crimes and tragic vignettes.

Though trauma may precede or attend them, small poems are not mainly pathological symptoms of underlying disorders. They bespeak pain and loss—by gesturing, suggesting—but do not or cannot enact a coherent, expressive account *of* these things. Instead, small poems place faith in ways that written words can be deliberately crafted into meaningfully spare, fractured forms; they are *structures* that intimate damage rather than *statements* describing it.

‘ ‘ ‘

Charles Altieri argues that Robert Creeley and Frank O’Hara ushered in a new, deliberately disheveled species of poetry in the 1950s and ’60s, that they “refused to give their texts the look and feel of well made poems.”<sup>37</sup> These terms are apt and identify, though in a lesser, lighter pitch, the “wrecked” feel of small poems. And even though O’Hara and Creeley—in indis severable company, of course, with their brilliant fellows—were innovative, spirited principals in the “New American Poetry,” early conduits of “the postmodern,” they were not at all the first to construct conscientiously coarse, ragged poems. Susan Howe’s claim regarding Dickinson’s intentionally “ugly” verse posits a distant, though still “modern,” point of origin, but even if we restrict the category to free verse, there is a rich vein of deliberately disheveled American writing among various modernists<sup>38</sup> of the 1920s and ’30s, where Niedecker and Oppen surface.

I recognize that Altieri means something very particular by saying certain poems eschew the “look and feel of well made poems”—a loose, exploratory style and language not *fussed* over—and I do not mean to quibble over terms and timelines. Most important for me is

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<sup>37</sup> Altieri continues, contending that the two poets “turned instead to what might be called an anti-artefactual aesthetics. They did this in part to resist the New Criticism, but in larger part to develop an alternative way of realizing New Critical ideals of casting poetry as a form of knowledge” (775). The essay from which this is cited is called, tellingly, “What Is Living and What Is Dead in American Postmodernism: Establishing the Contemporaneity of Some American Poetry.”

<sup>38</sup> I’m thinking of prominent poets like Williams, Stein, and Marianne Moore, as well as somewhat neglected writers like Mina Loy and Bob Brown. The case could also be made that much of Hart Crane’s or Wallace Stevens’ work has a distressed or disheveled quality.

acknowledging the more specific and older practice of putting words on a page such that they look, feel, and “sound” like an incompletely formed assemblage of pieces. Such assemblage-making is effected through, among other means: a conspicuous lack of, or nonstandard use of, punctuation; conspicuous marks of disjunction (spaces, irregular syntax, and the ruptures of enjambed line breaks); and, again, by the sheer fact of scale itself, the few odd lines recalling notes *toward* a poem, perhaps, or debris from some accident.

‘       ‘       ‘

Charles Sanders Peirce’s ideas will be more fully addressed in the subsequent section, but it would be helpful here to introduce briefly his notion of phenomenological “secondness,” on which his conception of reality and his linguistic realism principally depend. Firstness is the mere experience of feeling, of play and possibility. Secondness is a matter of matter, of existent things, that is, material, resistant *facts*. It is the experience of “brute actuality”; it is the “Outward Clash,” (CP 8.41) against and within which the person must responsively develop ideas, relations, habits, and beliefs (these latter two elements, insofar as they are formulated in thoughts and then words, are matters of “thirdness”). No single one of the three states, or forces, can exist as a pure, exclusive mode of experience; neither are they to be understood as linear or hierarchical. Rather, firstness, secondness, and thirdness constitute an interdependent triad; they are each and all constantly in force, intertwined, with respective modes becoming pronounced or preeminent in particular circumstances. But Peirce does take great care to distinguish between each mode, as he does here: “That of first is so tender that you cannot touch it without spoiling it; but that of second is eminently hard and tangible. It is very familiar, too; it is forced upon us daily; it is the main lesson of life” (EP 1:248). Using the universal process of maturation to clarify this distinction, he notes that in the firstness of youth, “the

world is fresh and we seem free; but limitation, conflict, constraint”—secondness—“make up the teaching of experience” (248).

The relevance of such ideas to putatively “wrecked” small poems is obvious. If experience itself accumulates around and through conflicts, commotions, and resistances, it makes sense that some persons would see fit to *figure* those facts and those feelings in damaged, material signs.

‘ ‘ ‘

Artworks can evoke damage on any scale, but in small works it is best rendered through conspicuous signs of hand-executed tearing, breakage, and assemblage. Writing is an activity of the hands, but the semantic nature of words often overshadows that fact. Therefore it is helpful to consider visual and/or sculptural works of art that are analogous to small poems, “significant little wrecks” whose aesthetic qualities we can experience more immediately (that is, literally, without having to read through a series or group of symbols). Many of Joseph Cornell’s boxes are magnificent parallels to small poems. Certain pieces—like the “Blue Sand Box,” with its smudged, chipped frame; its slight asymmetrical composition; and its playing of a faint pale grid against a bright metal spiral—are especially pertinent in their delicately arranged but worn, damaged ecology, their intimate austerity.

‘ ‘ ‘

Small poems are uniquely capable of witnessing and *bearing witness* to what impinges, injures, distresses, confuses, and overwhelms. They are not just amidst but beset by phenomena, that is *things, facts*. And they attest to the ways language can, paradoxically, make room for the unspeakable realities that seem to lurk behind, under, or within these elements of experience.

## Significances

Just as a small poem's damage is largely perceived as a function of its smallness, small-poem significance<sup>39</sup> (as such) is felt or adduced as a function of how cogently the poem evokes an interrelated sense of smallness and damage. In other words, small poems are "significances" only because and to the degree that they are already recognized as "little" and "wrecked."<sup>40</sup> In any case, small poems beg questions of significance, if for no other reason than in how sharply discrepant such texts are from other forms of language. But *how* are small poems significant? What do they *mean*, if anything, and/or what meanings attend their extension in the world?

‘ ‘ ‘

Granting the reasons that many critics have a strict policy of avoiding, if not nakedly scorning, attempts to sort out meaning ("It's a futile, logocentric discourse!"), I nonetheless point to the fairly pedestrian fact that meaning means much more, and much other, than "fixed transcendental ideas."<sup>41</sup> It includes questions of value, use, effect, and relation which must be answered by directing empiricist attentions not only to form, epistemology, or semantics but

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<sup>39</sup> "Significance" is roughly equivalent to what I intend to study as "meaning," and might be a more palatable (read less odious) key term. Also, that the word significance boasts the root "sign" speaks for it further, as this study operates primarily through *semiotic* lenses and equipment. For some thinkers, notably Susanne Langer, significance is a markedly distinct form of meaning. This, along with a small host of related terminological discrepancies—around words like "sign," "object," "expression," "symbolic," "form," "realism," and "representation"—will be sifted in good time, but it suffices here to indicate an unabashed, general interest in the uses and values that seem to adhere to experienced facts of poetic language.

<sup>40</sup> It could also be argued that a number of paratextual signs (those of a certain event or location, for instance) extrinsic to the page or book in question—like an aura—alert the reader to a realm of deliberate, meaningful language use, effectively priming the mind to formulate the concepts "small" and "damaged" once the text is encountered.

<sup>41</sup> Regarding the supposed menace of meaning, we might recall Archibald MacLeish's insistence that "a poem should not mean but be," a rather specious bit of mysticism. There is no way that poems, made of words, can *be* and not also *mean*. One of the irreducible aspects of language is that its elements have semantic accretions, however indeterminate those accretions are in a certain case. MacLeish would not likely have disputed the point; his prescription is clearly an effort to advocate poetic openness and autonomy over against the push to be rhetorical, didactic, or propositional. I only cite MacLeish's words because they are such a round, representative symptom of a larger modernist anxiety about meaning, a belief that it is necessarily an antagonism and a threat to Art. (Or at least a belief that poetry can liberate itself from the tethers and entanglements that "meaning" seems to traffic in and insist upon.)

also to materiality, duration, and other contextual aspects. In broad terms, that means that an inquiry into small poems finds itself asking questions about meaning and language along with questions about meaning and *things*, artifacts, since small poems' textual embodiment is one of their *sine qua non* conditions. Peirce, of course, is most ostensibly pertinent to the former category—"philosophical meaning"—but his semiotics, unlike Saussure's, also speaks forcefully to significances that are not strictly linguistic. His "pragmaticist" maxim, the dynamic kernel of his whole philosophical approach, formulates the following method for clarifying and thus determining the meaning of something:

Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, you conceive the object of your conception to have. Then, your conception of those effects is the whole of your conception of the object. (CP 5.438)

The exact form of this maxim should be noted, as Pragmaticism is first and foremost a *method* for understanding how the mind engages perceived signs—objects, ideas, feelings, events—and finds them meaningful by generating its own signs—thoughts and/or words—in response. Meaning is not itself an object which can be grasped or known in any definite way; rather, it is a byproduct of the triadic interrelation between a concrete sign, that is, a "representation" of some kind (perhaps but not necessarily a word); its object, that is, the thing represented that has predicated or engendered a sign; and the interpretant, which is the thought the mind forms *of*, in response to, the signified object (the sign *of* the object). The interpretant is not, as is mistakenly asserted from time to time, the interpreting subject, the person, but a thought-sign conceived *by* the person in response to the sign.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> "A sign, or *representamen*, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign," this last being the aforementioned "interpretant" (CP 2.228). It should also be stressed here that this definition, for Peirce, is wholly predicated on the doctrine of an underlying, dynamic *process*. As Sebeok reminds

The generating of interpretants, basically equivalent to “conceiving” in the maxim above, is the crucial, distinguishing element in Peirce’s semiotics, as it makes knowledge and meaning matters of an irreducible triadic relation that is irreducibly part of a fluid process—knowing, thinking, interpreting, habituating: in short, *semiosis*<sup>43</sup>: every interpretant the mind generates becomes a new sign/representation which refers to some new object of contemplation and in turn generates another new interpretant. This compounding and conversionary action of signs is perpetual. Thus meaning, in Peirce, is not chiefly objective or transcendental, but virtual and immanent, inseparable from the moving triadic relations which constitute the ongoing semiotic interaction of some embodied, conscious creature with its environment.

Some preemptive clarification is needed. Pragmatist notions of meaning, often variations on Peirce’s originating one quoted here, are chronically misinterpreted as insisting that meaning is located exclusively in *results*, that is, in the actual effects that do or don’t occur. But it is the mind’s habit of *conceiving* results—that is, of hypothesizing and anticipating ramifications—that is most fundamental to pragmatism. Experience continually bears out or contradicts, and generally modifies, these inferential assumptions, but meaning is not categorically *located* in observable results, just as it is not exclusively *found* in the subjective mind, or in some imaginary noumenal realm to which the mind might theoretically gain access. To reiterate, meaning in the Peircian view is no definite thing that can be either pinpointed in a conventional matrix (as in Structuralism) or inexorably lost and deferred at every moment (as in Post-Structuralism). Such

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us, “At the core of Peirce’s semi(e)otic one finds not at all, as is sometimes polemically claimed, the sign but semi(e)osis [sic]” (p. 64, *Semiotics in the United States*).

<sup>43</sup> Thomas Sebeok defines semiosis as “the universal propensity of the human mind for reverie focused specularly inwards upon its own long-term cognitive strategy and daily maneuvering” (“Semiosis and Semiotics” 97).

formalisms,<sup>44</sup> perspicacious though they are, assume that meaning, whether affirmed or rejected, must be necessarily metaphysical, some abstract thing to which words or actions have alleged reference. Instead, Peirce argues, meaning is simply the experience of recognizing relations and patterns in and through semiotic processes; it is caused by and *is* thirdness, the mediating and generalizing category; it is intelligibility (Brent 335), the fact that “firsts” and “seconds” (and “thirds” too, for that matter) are interpreted as having relations and continuities and practical bearing.

As the sign-perceiving and sign-producing animal imaginatively anticipates particular facts, feelings, and effects—in a book of poems, say, or behind a strange closet door—and then measures these conceptions against what is actually discovered (both in the empirical situation and in one’s own mind), meaning occurs as an inherent, inseparable byproduct of the semiotic interplay. In other words—and this is the striking, inside-out dimensionality of Peirce’s semiotic compared to Saussure’s semiology—meaning arises precisely *through* and *in* the mediation of signs; such mediation, though potentially misleading, is not mainly a fog that clouds and hinders our *reach for* meanings, but rather the matter-of-fact responsiveness which always already characterizes thought and language, in relation to each other and to the world of physical fact.

Experience means being enmeshed in an inescapable labyrinth of signs. Peirce writes that “The world is perfused with signs, if not composed exclusively of them” (*CP* 5.448); and “man is a sign... my language is the sum total of myself; for the man is the thought” (*CP* 5.314). Going even further into the ramifications of such total semiotics, in a letter to Lady Welby, Peirce firmly pronounces his skeptical empiricist view: “It is perfectly true that we can never

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<sup>44</sup> “I suspect that Peirce would be critical of poststructural theory for its thoroughgoing formalism, and might accuse it of being metaphysical for relying on a concept about which nothing can be *known*” (Sheriff 138, emphasis added).

attain a knowledge of things as they are. We can only know their human aspect. That is all the universe is for us” (141). But such a skeptical view is not automatically a degrading of the meaning or reality of what we do know; acknowledging the falsity of absolute idealism and rationalism can also ground realist convictions and explorations. Peirce is adamant that there are no strictly innate ideas, no intuitional truths; all knowledge comes through experience—that is, through signs and in the form of signs—but that knowledge, though mediated and contingent, is still *real* knowledge. Words and other signs are limited and potentially confusing, but they are not ultimately false or empty; they are the very things that allow us to inhabit a world and to navigate it with some measure, however small, of reliability. For Peirce it is not a belief in meaning or in realism that is perniciously metaphysical, but the absolutist dogma of “the incognizable” inherent to skeptical nominalism: “The nominalist must admit that man is truly applicable to something; but he believes that there is beneath this a thing in itself, an incognizable reality. His is the metaphysical figment” (*CP* 5.312). In the same essay, exposing what seems fallaciously disingenuous in overly intellectual skepticism, he exhorts, “Let us not pretend to doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts”<sup>45</sup> (“Some Consequences,” *CP* 5.265).<sup>46</sup>

By vigorously and carefully elaborating a *triadic* theory of signs, Peirce provides a uniquely complex position from which to study literary texts, a fully empiricist consideration of the phenomenal signs constituting both text and context that also (nonetheless) insists that the

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<sup>45</sup> Peirce’s appeal to the heart here, his sense of the heart as an “organ” of reliable knowledge, echoes Jonathan Edwards’ “Sense of the Heart,” which Perry Miller, and more recently, Joan Richardson (her book examines “The Fact of Feeling” from Edwards to Stein), have granted as philosophically insightful and valid.

<sup>46</sup> Such doubt is “false” because it doesn’t defer to experience; legitimate, productive doubt—which, as spelled out in Peirce’s “The Fixity of Belief,” ought to be the central galvanizing element in inquiry—actively opens itself up to the discomfitures and modifications of new facts. Somewhat paradoxically, such doubt-driven inquiry can only be legitimate and in good faith if it *doesn’t doubt*, rather matter-of-factly believes in, the premise of the whole endeavor—that directing attention to a thing will result in *some* sort of cognizance, and that directing further attention to that thing will tend to result in some more formalized, more developed (if not more definite) notion of the thing.

meanings that seem to adhere to these signs are, though provisional and relational, *real*. “All signs are real,” and complementarily, “signs are the very thing. Reals *are* signs” (qtd. in Brent, 357). Thus, all semiotic activities, including writing, reading, and speaking, are integrated, meaningful *parts* of reality, not extraneous, empty efforts to comment on, grasp, or master the real and the meaningful. And so signs—even the slippery abstractions of language, even the notorious, deliberate “irrationalities” of experimental poetry—can enhance and galvanize our sense of reality. The fact that signs are mediatory need not be understood as only pejorative or tragic.

Beyond method, Peirce’s ideas speak to the two chief types of meaning—linguistic and non-linguistic—as both involve sign-operations. Thus he stands at the center of this “essaying” new theory. It should be noted, though, that Peirce did not deal very much with aesthetics, or with analyses of particular works of art or poetry. He did regard aesthetics—associated with “firstness”: play, feeling, and possibility—as the all-pervasive and central aspect of experience,<sup>47</sup> but, when looking at actual artworks, the Peircean pragmatist finds need of some more specialized auxiliary voices who directly treat the non-linguistic meaning of *things*. After all, as I have tried to stress throughout this introduction, small poems—empirically considered—are not only, or not even mainly, speech-acts, utterances, events, performances, or processes. They are party to all such temporal modes, variously, especially the former two, since, by my parameters, even the most “wrecked” small poems make use of language as language, as semantically-laden material. Poems are indeed inextricable from the perpetual movements of time and space; they betoken the fluctuating semiotic processes in which they are fully implicated, and which are implicated in them. Yet when Niedecker, Oppen, Howe, Kim, and others fashion small,

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<sup>47</sup> He tellingly accorded it the foundational position in his hierarchy of the “normative sciences”: logic is based in ethics, which is based in aesthetics.

discrete texts and emboss them onto discrete pages, no matter how improvisational the language, they are expressing some measure of *resistance* to movement and flow. Their forms are disposed to an obduracy that differs from—juts out from or sinks down beneath—the vaporous, forward-driving waves of most language use, predominately those uses involving speech. Small poems, since they are visually and physically arresting works of *inscription*, since they have deliberately used pages to house their slight forms, are more like sculptures than songs, more like collages than cryptic, wily responses to a reporter's questions. Again, all meaning is not semantic; we must also consider the ways objects are valued.

## Conclusion

Susanne Langer, in *Philosophy in a New Key* makes a thorough, cogent case for what she calls “symbolic” meaning that precedes and underlies discursive meaning:

What we should look for is the first indication of symbolic behavior, which is not likely to be anything as specialized, conscious or rational as the use of semantic. Language is a very high form of symbolism; presentational forms are much lower than discursive, and the appreciation of meaning probably earlier than its expression. The earliest manifestation of any symbol making tendency, therefore, is likely to be *a mere sense of significance attached to certain objects*, certain forms or sounds, a vague emotional arrest of the mind by something that is neither dangerous nor useful in reality...Aesthetic attraction, mysterious fear, are probably the first manifestations of that mental function which in man becomes a peculiar 'tendency to see reality symbolically,' and which issues in the power of conception, and the life-long habit of speech. (110, emphasis added)

As I hope I have made clear in repeated qualifications, I am not arguing that small poems are simply objects which are confined to “lower,” inarticulate modes of meaning. But I am arguing that small poems are “presentational forms” of symbol-use (versus “discursive forms,” Langer 79 ff.) that retain, and more so actively retrieve, the kind of underlying, visceral aesthetic “sense of significance” Langer describes. Even though a small poem contains constituent forms and uses of language that have meaning, it is also significant *as* an object itself (what Peirce calls the formal or “dynamical” aspect of a representation), as a particular type of composite sign. Both page and book are *things* that can be cherished, like curious stones found at one’s feet, and pocketed.

Interested as she is in the roots of symbolic meaning, Langer cites some curious observations of primate treasuring:

Kohler describes how the chimpanzees will hoard perfectly useless objects and carry them between the lower abdomen and the upper thigh, *a sort of natural trouser pocket*, for days on end. Thus Tschego, an adult female, treasured a stone that the sea had rounded and polished. (Langer 114)

It is key to Langer’s argument that the cherished stone was utterly disjunct from explicable biological uses and needs—she notes, “No one knows what made the stone so valuable to Tschego” (114). It did not in any discernible way *signal* a vital matter by direct association. Symbolic objects, like the stone, are those which have become largely dissociated from practical matters of satisfying appetites. They have imputed powers of force and feeling that are bound up in their very thingliness, their graspable material form, rather than in some particular use that seeks a particular end. At the same time, such things, because they are so portable and palpable, are utterly bound up with the contiguities and relations of their contexts. They exist as

contingencies among a host of other contingencies, making the meaning they do accrue more metonymic than metaphoric. Peirce (who, it should be said, restricted his own term “symbol” to third-order signs that carried coded, conventional meanings—a word or a wordless corporate logo are equally “symbolic”) might have explained such objects as bearing a “firstness of secondness,” that is, as a second-order “index”-like sign which communicates not definite indexical facts or stimuli but cloudier meanings from the realm of firstness—feelings, possibilities, inchoate associations.<sup>48</sup>

Frank O’Hara, not exactly a small poet, but already noted for his radically impromptu and “disheveled” language, supplies an uncanny corroboration of Langer’s implied thesis that “lower”-level object-cherishing persists among homo sapiens, within and even coinciding with “higher” types of semiotic behavior. “Personal Poem” begins with these four lines:

Now when I walk around at lunchtime  
I have only two charms in my pocket  
an old Roman coin Mike Kanemitsu gave me  
and a bolt-head that broke off a packing case (32)

Of course the coin-gift is shot through with obvious vectors of signification, but, on the other hand, the crude, worthless broken-off bolt piece is every bit as mysteriously meaningful as Tschego’s stone. In another poem, “A Step Away From Them,” O’Hara extends the conception of a pocket-charm precisely to the ramified dimensions of small poems, where the physical thingliness, objective discreteness, of some gathering of linguistic signs is more immediately meaningful than the processed “interpretants” or “signifieds” contained therein.

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<sup>48</sup> Non-linguistic signs of secondness are called “sinsigns”; these may be manifested in the form of “icons” or “indices,” which manifestations will then in turn convey or prompt an interpretant-sign (roughly a “meaning,” a useful thought-response) in the form of either a possibility (“rheme”) or a fact (“dicent sign”). See Sheriff (67, 74) for charts and explanations of these terms.

The poem concludes with this abrupt declaration:

My heart is in my  
pocket, it is Poems by Pierre Reverdy. (17)

The first clause seems to ape some French Symbolist, or to spin the “heart-on-sleeve” idiom, but the second clause elegantly collapses these flights into the particular and the literal. “Poems by Pierre Reverdy” is *a book*, or at least a packet or wad of papers, that one really would carry around, stuffed in a pocket. *They*—the poems—are an *it*, the thing-in-the-pocket, a cherished object, a charm, which somehow accords with or equals, *is*, the poet’s heart. “Poems by Pierre Reverdy”—or a chapbook by Myung Mi Kim, or a scribbled transcription of a Howe poem—is, unlike some lucky twig, a uniquely complex and human sort of charm (after all, Reverdy and Kim are *names*, fellow persons who are understood to have had some hand in making the elements of the composite charm, others who have hearts that might be pocketed<sup>49</sup>). But in another sense the linguistic objects are precisely the same as the “bolt-head that broke off a packing case.” One could easily argue that only someone inclined to cherish metal scraps and coins as charms would conceive the richer, “higher” triangulation of heart, object, and words.

There is yet one more example of poem-as-portable-thing that begs mentioning. At least for now, it only needs a gesture of acknowledgement and a simple description, as it so strikingly bears out the notion of single-page significance being explored here. In conjunction with a National Poetry Month initiative, April 30<sup>th</sup> was declared “Poem in Your Pocket Day.” The idea, a bit of poetry evangelism geared primarily for incorporation in classrooms, is to write down a poem on a single sheet of paper and carry it around throughout the day, de-pocketing it from time to time to read and re-read. More remarkable than the plan itself—yet another

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<sup>49</sup> It hardly seems happenstance that both O’Hara poems cited are found in the book *Lunch Poems*, published in City Lights’ “Pocket Poets Series.”

massive expenditure in a desperate, probably futile effort to prove to the masses that poetry really does “matter”<sup>50</sup>—is the “book,” *A Poem In Your Pocket Anthology*, published in 2009. The book guise gives way upon opening the cover to find a sort of thick notepad of pages that resembles a tear-off calendar. The two hundred odd pages (none of which are numbered) have a simple, exposed glue binding at the top, and every page contains a single poem on its face and nothing on its backside, or verso. The idea, as with the popular day-by-day calendar analogue, is to tear off the pages, but unlike the calendar there is no system or code dictating a schedule or order. The “reader” is encouraged to tear out poem-pages and carry them around, handle them, subject them to the wear and tear of the day and of multiple readings. And it is only when a given page is physically ripped and completely separated from its bound, organized housing that that page and poem can achieve (according to the book itself) their best, liveliest purpose. Thus, ultimately, anyone who seriously engages the book will necessarily damage and dismantle the book!

Predictably, only a few of the short poems in the anthology consist in the spare, disjunctive language that characterizes small poems. But the book’s literalizing of the page-poem unit as a discrete object perfectly illustrates an effect or meaning that obtains in all small-poem situations, since the texts in question are purposively page-bound.

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Another perspective that helpfully complements Peirce, in regards to small-poem semiotic thingliness, is that of art historian George Kubler. In *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*, Kubler argues for a matter-of-fact empiricist approach to *all* objects made by

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<sup>50</sup> The sheer fact of spending the money, in a way, serves the declared purpose: thereafter, those who have announced their concern, interested parties, can reassure themselves or others by pointing to work done and an investment made.

humans, an approach unencumbered by abstruse metaphysics or the obfuscating attempts to analyze styles, schools, or biographies. Here is his Gordian-knot-cutting new starting point:

Science and art both deal with needs satisfied by the mind and the hands in the manufacture of things. Tools and instruments, symbols and expressions all correspond to needs, and all must pass through design into matter. (10)

Though he wants to distance himself from the word “meaning” (and from Ernst Cassirer in particular, who, along with Alfred North Whitehead, was an influential teacher and mentor of Susanne Langer), Kubler clearly articulates the position that the meaning of a thing is a function dually of its form or shape and its relation to some kind of need. And he has a wide-open but considered view of what might constitute a need and how certain things address them; specifically, he takes a trenchant position on the distinction between artworks and tools, a view felicitously parallel to Langer’s championing of “symbolic transformations” via word, object, and gesture:

How does artistic invention differ from useful invention? It differs as human sensibility differs from the rest of the universe. Artistic inventions alter the sensibility of mankind. They all emerge from and return to human perception, unlike useful inventions, which are keyed to the physical and biological environment...artistic inventions enlarge human awareness directly with new ways of experiencing the universe, rather than with new objective interpretations...they have no therapeutic or explanatory purpose; they only expand the range of human perceptions by enlarging the channels of emotional discourse (65-66).

William Carlos Williams, Muriel Rukeyser, Charles Olson, and many others have insisted on the dynamism and process of the poem, but in concrete texts such kinesis only occurs when someone *engages* the graphemes and morphemes. Like meaning, process or force or openness doesn't properly exist at all, much less within the contained space of the poem's page(s). As Kubler rightly envisages,

However fragmentary its condition, any work of art is actually a portion of arrested happening, or an emanation of past time. It is a graph of an activity now stilled, but *a graph made visible* like an astronomical body, by a light that originated with the activity. (19, emphasis added)

We must acknowledge, notwithstanding the risks and anxieties incurred regarding a “cult of things”<sup>51</sup> or the perils of decontextualization, that Niedecker, Oppen, Howe, and Kim are consummate, assiduous makers of *things*, not performances or temporal occurrences. Their poems certainly aren't hardened or closed; they aren't dead matter. But they are “arrested,” “stilled,” and given as “graphs” or emblems. Criticism of small poems ought to look for new ways to understand these terms, which only appear to be limiting and even pernicious, rather than recoiling from such words as if they are established evils. Written, printed poems, like all made things, “may be *compared* to fossil actions” (56) without equating them with, taking them as merely, fossils themselves.

If small poems are a form-class of fossil actions, portions of arrested happenings that answer to certain needs and “expand the range of human perceptions by enlarging the channels of emotional discourse” (66), then what are the actions and events being documented? Specifically, my contention has been that small damaged poems are significant because they

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<sup>51</sup> See Charles Altieri on “anti-artefactual” efforts in postmodern poetry (“What is Living”); and Adorno on Rilke (“Lyric Poetry and Society” 158).

enact a uniquely emblematic realism, that their way of incorporating and evincing violence can meaningfully galvanize our conviction that words have vital, real relations to the “external,” embodied world of experience, in particular the American witnessing of war, poverty, bounty, and the exponential progress of technology and capitalism over the last hundred years. This is not to say that small poems successfully describe reality or even that they achieve an open-form “realist” mimesis of its natural processes (the aim of certain organic or naturalistic forms of experiment); in fact, small poems doggedly refuse to pursue any such ideals where language is fully commensurable with experience. Page after page attests to a withdrawal from the swarming and cluttered world, a siding with a private mode of language rather than a continuous, all-inclusive one. On the other hand, though, even as their “linguistic skepticism”<sup>52</sup> catalyzes small poets’ boldness in verbal and formal play—stretching at times into “unreadable” texts or what has been neurotically deemed “nonsense”—they give no allegiance to the absolutist dogmas of language as reducible to empty, arbitrary signifiers. Ultimately, small poems demonstrate not a giddy autonomy of language, an abandonment of words’ putative meanings and ties to reality, but a shaky yet exigent interdependence of language and experience. Their words, however ungrammatical, banal, or unmoored from familiar contexts, always contain some distinct element of urgency, of a predicate or a consequence that, through word-signs, connotes human experience: passionate, personal, emotional, bodily, historical, what have you.

Thus, small poems are meaningful in how they envisage reality not as something that can

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<sup>52</sup> Richard Poirier pursues the thesis of “pragmatism as a form of linguistic skepticism,” arguing that “this skepticism is equally at work, and is indeed a generative principle, in the poets [he discusses]” (4). Turning attention to Emerson’s essays, he further clarifies his assumption “[T]hat by a conscious effort of linguistic skepticism it is possible to reveal, in the words and phrases we use, linguistic resources that point beyond skepticism” (11). Joan Richardson’s *A Natural History of Pragmatism* takes up Poirier’s basic assumption in order to trace an even broader and more deeply embedded genealogy of the correlations between linguistic skepticism and aesthetics in America. Also, for related accounts of the significance of skepticism, see Sebeok (114-18) and nearly all of Stanley Cavell’s writings.

either be described and grasped nor escaped and denied, but as poetry's true condition and aim, as invoked by Paul Celan, who ventures that poems are "making toward...an addressable reality," that a poet "goes with his very being into language, stricken by and seeking reality" ("Bremen Speech" 396). This suggests a poetic realism distinguished not by the deployment and control of words' meanings, but by injuries suffered in sincere, good-faith attempts to discover verbal meaning. The various significances, then, that I am asserting for small poems—formal, pragmatic, aesthetic, or ideological—are all inseparably tied to a central argument about their peculiar realism, which is a matter of their conflicted but tenacious investments in both semantic meaning and aesthetic, "symbolific" meaning.

**Chapter Two:  
Handmade Modernism: A Reading of Lorine Niedecker's  
"Next Year Or I Fly My Rounds, Tempestuous"**

A poem is a small (or large) machine made of words.

...  
No ideas but in things. (W.C. Williams)

Throw *things* / to the flood  
(Niedecker, *Paeon to Place*)

...that I as a writer will portray my epoch and truthfully evoke life in  
its totalities only as I am able to make magic, magic of dream and deep  
subconscious and waking isolation thick with impenetrability  
(Niedecker, Letter, Feb. 12, 1934, qtd. in *LNWP* 181).

Semiosis: the universal propensity of the human mind for reverie focused  
specularly inwards upon its own long-term cognitive strategy and daily  
maneuvering. (Thomas Sebeok, "Semiosis & Semiotics")

...movement in stillness out of which the action of words comes clear.  
(Niedecker, *Domestic and Unavoidable*, 1935)

Having cast together a notion of the special significance of pocketed objects in the theoretical meanderings above, it is appropriate now, in turning to concrete examples, to look closely at a book of small poems written on (and as) a "pocket calendar," measuring 4 ½ by 3 ¾ inches. Late in 1934, Lorine Niedecker took over the pages of a 1935 "Favorite Sunlit Road Calendar" in order to compose a gift-book of poems, which she sent from her home in Black Hawk Island, Wisconsin to her friend Louis Zukofsky in New York City. The book, which Niedecker titled "Next Year or I Fly My Rounds, Tempestuous," is manifestly a work of appropriation, or *détournement*, because where each of the calendar's pages had contained a narrow column of exhortative text in its center, Niedecker pasted her own poems—handwritten on paper cut to the column's size—directly over the anonymously penned proverbs<sup>53</sup> in

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<sup>53</sup> The nugatory aphorisms are quintessential examples of abstract American moral virtue, little clichéd tenets of industry and self-reliance, carrying more than a whiff of authoritarian masculinity. Jenny Penberthy, who has had the closest look at the pages, offers these two examples of the original texts: "True bravery is/ shown by performing / without witness what / one might be capable / of doing before all the / world"; and "To reach the

typeface. The work—in both its words and its material form—is playful and parodic, while still retaining an urgent sense of mystery throughout, a weirdness in its references and its way of syncopating utterances; it is almost “Duchampian,” though with more human sinew and with none of the stunt-like qualities one tends to find in the modernist maestro. Here is one of the 27 pages:



(CW 25)

What is the significance of these poems that aren't quite poems, this book that isn't exactly a book? Penberthy refers to the work's "intimate mnemonics," and this sense is clearly not due only or even chiefly to the meanings of the words used; rather to the way the words, and the book as a whole, carry a nonverbal and quasi-verbal semiotics of intimacy and mindfulness. Indeed, in its carefully built, deftly marked condition and its layered signage—words and numbers, typed and handwritten shapes, distinct paper surfaces, and, a literal layering, in the

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port / of heaven, we must / sometimes sail with / the wind and some- / times against it—but we must sail and not / drift, nor lie at anchor." In *Sulfur* 41, Fall 1997.

visible palimpsest effect of the pasted-over text—“Next Year or I Fly My Rounds, Tempestuous” bears more resemblance to one of the Joseph Cornell constructions mentioned in the chapter above than to almost any book of poetry from either 1934 or today.

Jenny Penberthy, the most diligent and perspicacious Niedecker scholar and the editor of the “magisterial” volume (DuPlessis, “Reflective” 175), *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works* (2002), discovered the “Next Year” gift-book in 1997 among materials in Louis Zukofsky’s archive in Austin, Texas. Boldly and generously and, I think, wisely, she took pains to have the entire book included in facsimile form in the *Collected Works*. It was practically unknown until published there, a one-off bit of ephemera, an act and an object cast insouciantly into the void of its immediate purpose as gift. Apparently Zukofsky showed the little book to W.C. Williams, who, according to Penberthy, “liked it and told Zukofsky that he would have published it if he had had a press” (“A Little Too Little” 3). Niedecker, of course, was thrilled at the time to hear such a report, but (as with most of her early-phase experiments) she never said anything much of it or tried to preserve it in another form. Nonetheless, the making and sending of the little portable book was a vital instance of small-poem publication.

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Earlier in 1934, a more conventional book of small poems, a complement to Niedecker’s, was published by the Objectivist Press. George Oppen’s *Discrete Series*, the fruit of a few years’ production executed from within the incipient Objectivist milieu, is a slim, small (approximately 5” by 7”) green, cloth-bound volume made up of, in keeping with its title, 31 pieces, each occupying a single page and most untitled. Both Niedecker’s and Oppen’s books of 1934 represent a culmination of the few years following the 1929 financial crash and then, in 1931, *Poetry* magazine’s “Objectivists” issue. In the more immediate aftermath of economic

boom-and-collapse and the more diffuse but still exigent wake of the Great War, 27 year-old Louis Zukofsky and company—not a school but a “nexus,” as Quartermain and DuPlessis convincingly explain<sup>54</sup>—launched a bracing, variegated bundle of poetic theory and practice onto the already crowded modernist stage. George Oppen was a cohort insider, though he had not yet published a book; Lorine Niedecker, on the other hand, was nowhere near the rather elevated nexus (sponsored by, one might say, and loosely including Ezra Pound and W.C. Williams). Nevertheless, as she was already avidly tuned-in to modern poetry and had written a bit herself, she read that issue of *Poetry* and in her enthusiasm contacted Zukofsky, who became her port-of-entry into a larger poetic community and the most vital, sustained correspondent over her lifetime.

Thus the 1931-‘32 Objectivist event—the content of the writings (centrally Zukofsky’s “An Objective,” “Sincerity and Objectification: Some Notes on the Poetry of Charles Reznikoff,” and “‘Recencies’ in American Poetry”) but also the sheer fact of their coalescing and appearing as an entity—had significance for Oppen more as an official moment of cultural sanction, while for Niedecker it was more urgently personal and enlivening.<sup>55</sup> But for both, the event opened the way for and conditioned the two books under discussion, two analogous commitments to terse, evocative single-page texts that nonetheless adhered like distinct badges to two very divergent paths of “small” practice, that is, forms of refusal or aloofness.

Soon after *Discrete Series* was published, Oppen more or less opted out of his role as poet, a role he didn’t formally assume again until 1959, when he began writing the poems later published in *The Materials* (1962). Like Laura (Riding) Jackson, Oppen’s “renunciation” followed

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<sup>54</sup> See their editorial introduction to *Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics* (University of Alabama Press, 1999).

<sup>55</sup> Glenda Breslin, citing Niedecker, encapsulates the moment: “She had published just two poems, but she knew enough about herself as a writer to greet the objectivists’ issue of *Poetry* as a dramatic confirmation: ‘I saw it and knew here was the center of literature in this country and in the world’” (26). In “Lorine Niedecker and Louis Zukofsky,” *Pacific Coast Philology* (November 1985) 20:1/2. 25-32.

a period of intensive absorption in the modernist scene and stemmed, finally, from an ethical desire to address the world's imbalances by means more direct than modernist aesthetic production.<sup>56</sup> On the other hand, whereas Oppen's book marked a culmination and also an abrupt cinching off of his poetic activity, Lorine Niedecker's "publication" of her own discrete series, "Next Year or I Fly My Rounds, Tempestuous," marked an initiation into a restive, exploratory, and burgeoning engagement with poetry, a set of vocational habits that persisted unabated through the remainder of her life. In spite of fluctuations of productivity and some abiding habits of preserving distance, she never renounced or declared a break from poetry itself.

Some of Niedecker's poems and writings had been published in journals, but in 1934 she had no book to her name. Thus, taking the matter quite literally into her hands, she assembled her own. The *matter* here, though, is not that of needing a formal, printed exhibition of one's accomplishments to date. When she created "Next Year," Niedecker demonstrated an interest in bookmaking as such, in the immediate practice of putting text onto multiple pages and then giving the resultant book a name. The named whole can be considered a group of poems or a single poem; in any case, it is not a collection of sundry preexisting pieces, but new writing specific to its material and temporal conditions—the calendar and the gift-occasion, respectively. Whether one speaks of the work as poems or as one poem is less important than considering the poetics of the whole, the indisputable fact that the work is a *book* made up, in a particular way, of page-pieces, the whole accorded a title and sent as a gift.

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<sup>56</sup> Oppen, along with his family, directed their attentions to hands-on involvement with labor organization and other concrete efforts at redressing social injustice. Michael Davidson summarizes the situation simply enough: "The experience of the 1930s convinced him that the aesthetic strategies of his modernist predecessors were no longer adequate to deal with the social trauma of increasing modernization" (*NCP* xx).

There is a plain irony to how these coinciding first books, these rigorous small-poem statements, accord with such disparate respective movements: *into* poetic inquiry and production for one, and *out* of it for the other. Nonetheless, Niedecker, too, pursued her own course, her own version of refusal, one that could be called even more radical than Oppen's. Despite her great appreciation for the poetic communities into which she became vitally enfolded, she continuously exercised a resistance to them also; she did not want her work to be read only through the lens of Zukofsky's work or only in relation to the poets who had gathered—in print and in place (chiefly New York City)—around those tenets and modes. Her decision to stay in Black Hawk Island and Fort Atkinson, to write and correspond and seek publication but to do so from within the difficult and patently humbler conditions of Midwestern towns, must be reckoned as a *deliberate* course of demurral, of aloofness. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, citing Niedecker's "avoidance strategies" with respect to requests to give readings, posits a lively version of this contention captured in a terse, self-assured comment. When asked to make a public appearance in 1965, Niedecker refused,

explaining [in a letter to Cid Corman] 'I fight shy of that kind of thing' (*BYM* 77). 'I fight shy' is a Niedecker motif. Niedecker is both shy, resistant, reluctant, *and* what one might call 'fighting shy'—aggressively, decisively, contendingly shy, both presenting her shyness and maneuvering it. (*RV* 152)

As time went on, Niedecker sought and maintained relations with other avant-garde milieus—London, San Francisco, Chicago, and Black Mountain, North Carolina. She was deeply thankful for these centers of ferment and productivity, tied in as she was through vigorous correspondence and reliable avenues of publication in progressive journals;<sup>57</sup> but she

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<sup>57</sup> For example, *New Directions*, *Origin*, *Black Mountain Review*, *Caterpillar*, among others.

chose to stand apart from them also; decade after decade she elected to live and work in Wisconsin.

In Lorine Niedecker's case, this fundamental and abiding (that is, continually reasserted) decision of where to root oneself, where and in what ways to invest one's physical energies, is not a matter of either mere disposition or of isolationism. Allying herself to her hometown was part of a full and complex poetics, and that keystone choice of dwelling is reflected in and corroborated by more specific ongoing practices of "preferring not-to": Niedecker refused to give readings of her work (though at the very end of her life she did allow Cid Corman to record her reading a few poems when Corman came to visit her); following some more exploratory works in the 1930s, she never wrote poems in long lines or filled-out pages; outside of her letters, she did not strive, as did many of her male contemporaries, toward achievements in what is called "poetics," discursive theorizing on language and poetry and art; and she repeatedly presented her own work in the form of handwritten, handmade books, in which she rigorously deployed lines onto the front sides of unnumbered pages, refusing, "wastefully," to write on the pages' back faces. (This last, peculiarly concrete set of practices associated with bookmaking, will be engaged at several key points going forward.) As Peter Middleton so effectively, and, it seems to me definitively, argues in "Lorine Niedecker's 'Folk Base' and Her Challenge to the American Avant-Garde," Niedecker counters the avant-garde's hieratic dispensationalism through her assiduous allegiance to the local and vernacular, even as she also unsettles any conventional notion of what "folk" or "regional" or "personal" poetry is assumed to be. Like Flannery O'Connor, who dug in her heels in rural Georgia and wrote about the South but *of* something else or something more, Niedecker bristled at the condescension, especially insidious when aimed at women, implicit in the categorization "regional." Her canny retort to that term is

famously found in one of her letters: “What region—London, Wisconsin, New York?” (Faranda 208). She maintained vital and successful connections with cosmopolitan realms—she certainly never rejected or scorned them outright—but her deepest and most abiding commitments were not to the rather insular (and often arrogant) dispensations of avant-garde art but to home, to the fleeting, the durable, the curious, the ordinary.

Instead of endeavoring to gain a larger hearing in ever-wider circles, she turned her efforts toward listening carefully to things closer and smaller. Contemporary poet Rae Armantrout, herself a consummate small poet, rightly notes that “[n]o one could accuse [Niedecker] of grandiosity,” and then goes further, suggesting that her work “ridicules the significance of publicity or exposure” (“Darkinfested” 105). It is absolutely critical in attending to Niedecker—the point cannot be reiterated too much or overemphasized—that she not be regarded as a pitiable victim of neglect or marginalization. Rather, “[h]er isolation was a deliberate and creative choice that fostered her poetry, whatever its other costs and deprivations” (Middleton, “Folk Base” 2)

Thus in both cases, Oppen’s and Niedecker’s, small poetic form is accompanied by or rather grounded in a posture of smallness, of demurral. This chapter will consider Oppen’s and Niedecker’s work circa 1934. Together, Oppen’s more official, formal book of 1934 and Niedecker’s utterly singular, *ad hoc*, and ephemeral one from the same year establish two complementary faces of an inaugurating small-poem moment. Niedecker would go on to publish several “official” books—most notably *New Goose* (1946), whose book-form is reminiscent of *Discrete Series*—just as she would continue to fashion handmade, holograph gift-books. Oppen’s writing, for his part, entailed something of the same dialectic; the celebrated string of books published throughout the 1960s were carved out of and undergirded by, as

Michael Davidson’s archival scholarship in *Ghostlier Demarcations* and elsewhere shows, elaborately piled and bound groupings of manuscript materials, predominately in what Oppen referred to as *Daybooks*.<sup>58</sup> Common to all of these approaches is a notion of poems as irreducibly bound to their particular material conditions—the way letters are rendered on a given concrete page and the way similar pages are gathered together as some bundle or book. More importantly for this study, Oppen and Niedecker, early and late, manifested this concern with writing-as-material by presenting poems that were persistently small and spare and inextricably fused to the pages containing them. The consistency of this habit renders each rectangular surface as, in a sense, *part* of the poem inscribed thereon, instead of a mere location.

Their texts—mirroring the dichotomous “fighting shy” disposition attributed to Niedecker—are not only small but in a sense feisty, recalcitrant, their cryptic meanings generated through severity of their line breaks and their almost defiant partiality. Words and images float in white space like selected debris from a pulverized realist novel:

What a  
white muffler  
in a dark coat  
will do for a  
dull man . (“Next Year,” *LNCW* 56)

In [1941], Wallace Stevens hit upon a seminal formulation of what the human imagination does, what the poet’s work—a form of “nobility” in Stevens’ view—is, vis-à-vis some environing context: “It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without, the pressure of the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality” (*WS* 665). The complementary small poetics of Lorine Niedecker and George Oppen represent one particular way, a mode not

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<sup>58</sup> Many of the bound groupings are identified simply by their distinctive way they are held together: *The Pipe Cleaner Book*, *The Nail Book*, etc.

duly acknowledged or considered, that American writers can take exception to and press back against the America they live within and through. Small poems unflinchingly witness and absorb the “violence without,” transmuting it into shard-like texts that carry a sense of sharp reproach in their evident fissures, edges, diminished scale, and their page-bound silence.

Such a poetics, especially in reference to poetry from the 1950s or ‘60s, is usually understood as being bound exclusively to a Post- or Cold-War paradigm. Certainly the Second World War (at whose cusp Stevens delivered his lecture from which the above-quoted words are taken) and its aftermath bore on Oppen and Niedecker and are strikingly reflected in their post-war writings. My contention in this chapter, however, is that they had formulated this pertinacious small poetics earlier as a dissenting response to American realities that were, certainly by 1934, already plagued by disorienting superfluity, devastating widespread poverty, and manifold shocks of “progress.” In the collection of aphoristic essays, *Minima Moralia* (written in 1945 and ‘46)—its telling and relevant subtitle is “Reflections on Damaged Life”—Theodor Adorno argues trenchantly that

Progress and barbarism are today so matted together in mass culture that only *barbaric asceticism* towards the latter, and towards progress in technical means, could restore an unbarbaric condition. No work of art, no thought, has a chance of survival, unless it bear within it *repudiation of false riches and high-class production...*The older media, not designed for mass production, take on a new timeliness: that of exemption and improvisation. They alone could outflank the united front of trusts and technology. (50-51, emphasis added)

Leaving aside for the moment the vexed, maybe futile questions of what it might mean for such artworks to “restore an unbarbaric condition” or “outflank [a] united front,” Adorno’s broad-

spectrum aesthetic notion also serves as an uncannily apt characterization of small poems, their posture and their import. In 1934 Oppen and Niedecker used the bounded, material space of the physical page—an “older media”—to practice a poetics of “barbaric asceticism.” Both words in this provocative term effectively indicate the intensity, the almost religious urgency, of breaking lines and positioning them sparsely on a page, of boldly calling the thing “a poem.” Ascetic in this case need not connote morbid self-laceration or self-denial, but should be taken in its proper root sense: *ascesis*—rigor, diligence, and discipline toward some envisaged end. And although the word barbaric, in relation to twentieth-century poetry, has a knee-jerk association with Adorno’s oft-quoted comment about “writing poetry after Auschwitz,”<sup>59</sup> this much lesser-known passage is far more challenging and complex in its use of “barbaric” as a direct prescription.

Though the Second World War was certainly a profound cleavage<sup>60</sup> for art as for every other facet of American culture, it was not the sole and absolute engenderer of the formally experimental, sometimes “barbaric” American poetry that followed in its long wake. America in the 1930s was already undergoing a sort of embedded and smoldering catastrophe, plagued by both human poverty and the “false riches” of technological glut. What Lyn Hejinian says of the time, referring to Oppen’s writing, aptly characterizes the conditions within and against which both he and Niedecker worked:

The poems that were assembled into the *Discrete Series* (published in 1934) were written between 1928 and 1933, a period in which the shock effects so

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<sup>59</sup> In an essay collected in *Prisms*, Adorno cryptically declares that “to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric.” The words are usually construed as meaning that “there can be no poetry” in the wake of such a watershed horror as the Holocaust. In fact, the whole sentence runs “To still write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric and it corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today.”

<sup>60</sup> Peter Nicholls, in “Wars I Have Seen,” concisely presents this view through a recapitulation of Charles Bernstein’s strident characterizations of *pre-* versus *post-war* American poetry in “The Second War and Postmodern Memory” (24-25).

characteristic of capitalist modernity were particularly acute, occurring, as they were, against a backdrop of widespread historical trauma, marked by the Depression and the politically conservative decade that led up to it.

(“Preliminary” 53-54)

In *The Maximus Poems*, Charles Olson—the standout inaugurating voice of post-war “New American Poetry” advises, “in the land of plenty, have / nothing to do with it / take the way of / the lowest, / including / your legs, go / contrary, go / sing” (*Maximus* 19). Well before the mid-1950s, when Olson penned this injunction and when poets like Robert Creeley were assenting to it and realizing it textually by writing small poems in a Cold War context, two wayward but scrupulous objectivists were “going contrary” to 1930s America, a dichotomous land of plenty and penury, awkwardly intertwined. In “Next Year Or I Fly My Rounds, Tempestuous” and *Discrete Series*, Niedecker and Oppen discovered, as it were, an evocative form of aesthetic response to such enormities: groupings of poems whose persistently small size and strained, cryptic language set them sharply apart from perfectionist high-modernist works, especially ones of the larger scale,<sup>61</sup> as well as from the crudely instrumental or coldly manipulative objects of Capitalist culture—gadgets, advertisements, assembly-line products. At the same time, both poets—owing somewhat to contemporaneously enunciated Objectivist principles but more deeply, as I will argue, to fundamental Peircean ideas about signs and experience—enacted their respective “barbaric asceticisms” in ways that implicitly uphold a stalwart concept of reality rooted in the ordinary.<sup>62</sup> Their small poems are plainly the result of

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<sup>61</sup> *The Waste Land* (1922) and Pound’s *Cantos*, then in-process, are the most ready example of this vein. See also Hart Crane’s *The Bridge* (1932) and Zukofsky’s *A* (it’s first version and part initially titled “Poem Beginning “The””, which was also underway at the time.

<sup>62</sup> Notions of the “commonplace” and the “ordinary,” of course, are of central importance to thinkers from Emerson and Thoreau to J.L. Austin, Wittgenstein, and Stanley Cavell, who has grappled with these concepts in and by means of all of the others.

attention deeply paid to the world, and they are plainly invested in the viable relations between words and things, even as those relations are also loosened and questioned. Niedecker's and Oppen's texts emblematically bear witness to disorienting conditions; they are page-forms to hold, consider, and by which potentially to orient oneself, both a charting of and a check against the impinging realities of the 1930s.

More particularly, "Next Year Or I Fly My Rounds, Tempestuous" effects both responses through an implicit emphasis on *hands* and a conjuring of Peircean "Firstness" in language—chance, play, and potentiality. The poems in *Discrete Series*, correspondingly, evoke *rooms* and give a stronger sense of Peircean "secondness"—the "outward clash" of resistant matter, the experience of existent facts as such.

‘ ‘ ‘

As with any putative style or movement or "form-class,"<sup>63</sup> no declared genesis or ideal first instance will finally hold up in the story of small poems. But in the 1934 Oppen/Niedecker, *Discrete Series*/"Next Year" nexus, we have at least one dynamic site to initiate *our* investigation. Specifically, Niedecker's pocket-sized dossier of mischievous, syncopated vocal inscriptions, this handcrafted, *sui generis* trifle rescued from the archive, is an ideal moment of *arche*, since origins in any case are stuck being partly imaginary. Small poetry is in many ways a mythos, so let this buried then disinterred object (and act, and composite *set* of acts) be an axial root and point of departure.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> This is George Kubler's crucial term, in *The Shape of Time*, for characterizing persistent artifactual types.

<sup>64</sup> I say axial to indicate the multiple departures or vectors—going backward as well as laterally and forward—that could be usefully drawn from "Next Year" as a material and temporal fact. Even posited, fanciful moments of origin do not erupt from nothing; they are, like every other particular supposed to be discrete, embedded in context, entangled in relations and contiguities that run in all directions.

**“Next Year Or I Fly My Rounds, Tempestuous” (A Counter-Reading)**

“Next Year Or I Fly My Rounds, Tempestuous” evinces a “barbaric asceticism” in its crude, off-hand construction, its often enigmatic swerves of reference, its relentless line breaks, and its uncompromising confinement of its pieces to such small spaces, thus to so few words.

One poem declares simply, in slapdash cursive,

I talk at the top  
of my white  
resignment . (55)

The coarse construction, proclivity to swerves, line breaks, and small scale are also the salient features that suggest *damage*, though as with the recuperative works of Joseph Cornell mentioned above, the marks of force and wear are deliberately cultivated and exhibited to view by the hands of the poet. The particular significances, the meanings, of these “little wrecks” is partly a function of their rough-hewn, handwritten smallness but also of their intense mingling of more stable verbal semiotics with looser, more associative, nonverbal semiotics. The actual words of “Next Year” are more or less reliable in their denotations, as the lines cited above show, but the crowding and blurriness and parataxis of the tiny hand-inscribed calendar pages complicate the word-meanings with their own visual and material significations. This synthesis of referential and associative semantics, of course, echoes ideas put forth by Louis Zukofksy in 1931 and 1932 as Objectivist poetics, ideas which accord remarkably with Peirce’s semiotics:

An idea—not an empty concept. An idea—its value including its meaning... (210)

...

In poetry the poet is continually encountering the facts which in the making seem to want to disturb the music and yet the music or the movement cannot exist without

the facts, without its facts. The base matter, to speak hurriedly, which must receive the signet of form. (214)

...

Poems are only acts upon particulars, outside of them. Only thru such activity do they become particulars themselves—i.e. poems. (214)

...

The economy of presentation in this writing is a reassertion of faith that the combined letters—the words—are absolute symbols for objects, states, acts, interrelations, thoughts about them. If not, why use words? (198)

...

[T]he poet's image is not dissociable from the movement or the cadenced shape of the poem...most western poets of consequence seem constantly to communicate the letters of their alphabets as graphic representations of thoughts—no doubt the thought of the word influences the letters but the letters are there and seem to exude thought. (211)

But Niedecker's book moves well beyond Objectivist principles in its unabashed engagement with chance and play, a disposition or element usually referred to as her "surrealism." I will respectfully eschew this term (as Niedecker herself did, ultimately), in order to show how her playful, "chancy" poetics corresponds to Peirce's notion of chance as an "untameable"<sup>65</sup> yet "concentrative" force in the universe, unlike the force of Law, which he characterized as ultimately "dissipative" ("Design and Chance," *EP* 215-224).

The "Next Year" book was Niedecker's first serial experiment in small-poem form (the serial work "Progression"—1933-'34—is lush, voluble, and accretionary); it is a conceptual work

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<sup>65</sup> I am here alluding to Ian Hacking's book *The Taming of Chance*, which counts Peirce as the principal philosopher who "untamed" the concept of chance as understood by positivist thinkers.

of appropriation, a bit of canny fun wherein she supplanted typed digestible “morals” with handwritten quizzical riffs. This also stands as Niedecker’s first known effort at bookmaking. The book in this case is conceived simply as a portable vehicle for housing some group of pages, and it establishes a set of key parameters adhered to in later handmade books (“Paeon to Place” and *Homemade Poems*), the most striking of which is its determined joining of each discrete poem to a single page. In fact, in all of her handmade books, each verse is housed not only *on* its own page surface but *by* its own piece of paper, the backside or verso left blank. Thus a given page is a sort of *billet*, a jotted note or sketch that could be unbound and pasted to a wall. These blanks punctuate the books as interstitial silences, rhythmic rests, but the use of them also represents a choosing of aesthetics over economy—wanting to address the reader from one face while including provocatively hidden empty space behind. Such unmarked spaces deepen the ground, the field, on which each poem lies, giving the work a thickness, an extended relief-like dimensionality.

Some excellent critical work has been done on Niedecker’s seriality, especially in the poems of her later phase, and for good reason. Indeed, though she worked always in small forms, Niedecker was constantly arranging and rearranging the small works into sequences and collections. Later, this poetics was translated from the scale of the group into a poetics of longer poems, of which *Paeon to Place* (1968) is arguably the standout achievement. These longer works—“Wintergreen Ridge,” “Darwin,” and “Lake Superior” jump to mind—may seem patently to transcend or obviate the small poem designation. For though each piece is made up of a sequence of clearly demarcated stanzas or parts, the net result in each case is a single work, a poem, with its own title and set of recurring verbal or structural motifs. At the same time, Niedecker’s longer serial poems might be said to consist of many smaller poems, each stanza a

unit worthy of attention apart from the stream and span of the series entire. Finally, the fact *that* some poem has a discernibly serial and open form is less important than how the poem is given shape and how it takes shape for a reader.

When the stanzas are stacked one on top of another, with the merest white space between them, as in Niedecker's *Collected Works*, the words run down the page. The reader moves fluidly from line to line and image to image, threading connections down through the vertical column of text. Other discrete poems of Niedecker's are encountered in the same way—as pages are turned, the reader finds sundry pieces lying along the page, a few on the left side, a few on the right. A single poem may be visible as an intact unit, set off from other poems by strong black dots, or it may run from the left page onto the right, or from the right page around again to the next left-hand page. The effect here is of looking at a menagerie, at shelves upon shelves of curios evenly distributed across the available space. There is of course no avoiding such a layout in a comprehensive catalogue like *Collected Writings*; it is simply an expediency. And it should be added that the necessity of stacking poem after poem in the book is generously compensated for by the wonderfully wide and white-space-rich pages throughout.

In any case, every time Niedecker constructed her own books, she held to a very particular mode: one poem or stanza per page, no writing on the back or verso side of the page, repeated iterations of a visual form with modulating differences, and copious abrupt, enjambed line breaks. Among the three handmade books mentioned, the lines in “Next Year” are perhaps the most heavily enjambed—and the breaks carry greater dramatic tension—due to the pinched, ultra-narrow page-field for each poem (the strips of paper Niedecker pasted and wrote on are approximately 2 ½” wide by 4” high). The lines, then, might be said to have been broken “by chance,” the form of each discrete line dictated meaninglessly by the arbitrary physical

constraints in play. Indeed, this is how Elizabeth Robinson, citing Joseph Conte's notion of procedural form, accounts for the shape of these poems, claiming that "the framework of the printed calendar page serves as the arbitrary constraint"<sup>66</sup> (119). Robinson later elaborates on her view of these constraining factors:

The calendar entries are formatted at a fortnight per page. It is difficult to discern exactly what Niedecker had in mind for the formatting of her own writing, since the *given shape* of the pages combined with her own handwriting *delimit the space*...it is evident throughout the poem that the narrow margins of the calendar page *constrained* Niedecker's line breaks. (119-20, emphasis added)

Characterizing the "Next Year" writings this way assumes an arbitrary and adversarial relation between a writer and her physical writing conditions, as if the poet initially has something "in mind"—thought's raw, pure, unbounded matter—and then, attempting to embody that thought as writing, must stumble willy-nilly into a gauntlet of uncontrollable, inimical strictures (including even the poet's own handwriting!). Certainly there are concrete boundaries in play in the pages of "Next Year," just as there are for the pages of Whitman's self-produced edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855. Any page, after all, necessarily encloses. The very function of pages is to delimit and constrain—to package—whatever markings or writings are bestowed onto them.<sup>67</sup> But the writer usually chooses and thus works *with*, not only under or against, certain parameters. The *given* shape of the page is also a shape the writer actively receives or takes up. Smallness, when it is chosen, is not arbitrary.

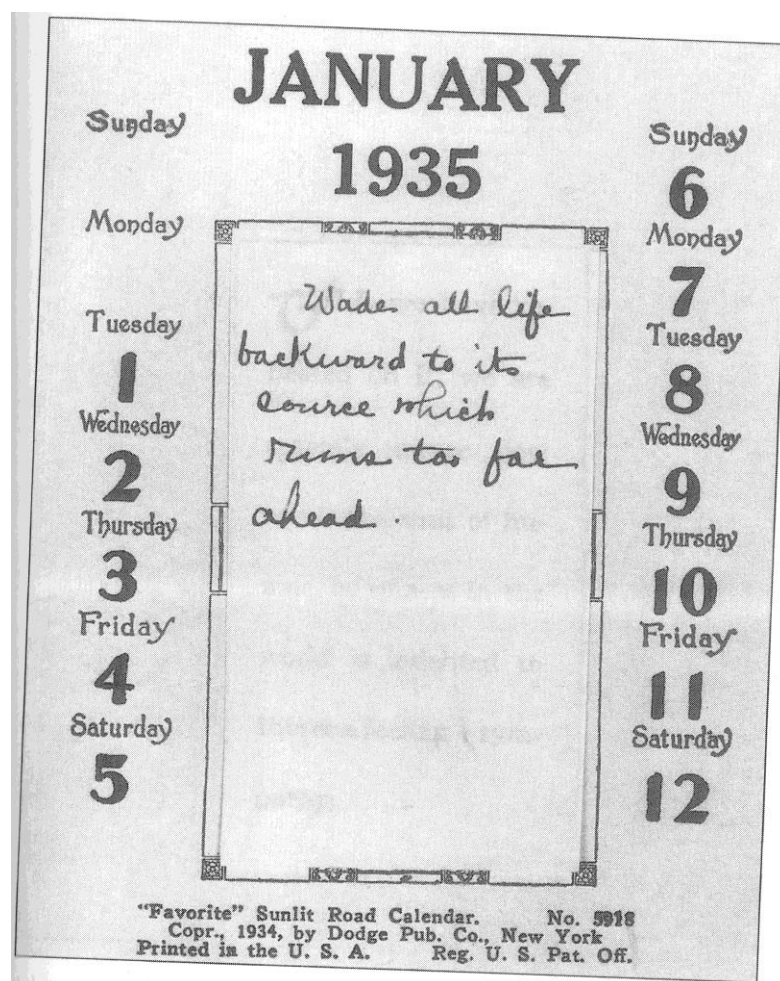
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<sup>66</sup> A procedural poem, instead of packaging antecedent content in some form, "proposes a system of arbitrary constraints which functions as a generative device" (40). Conte poses this form with and against "serial form." In her reading of "Next Year," Robinson emphasizes the open or serial aspects of the poem(s), so it is her short-shrifting of the work's procedural qualities that most needs redressing.

<sup>67</sup> The codex, with its sharply framed and bound pages, is after all only one vehicle for writing, only one kind of *book*. Consider obvious exceptions such as scrolls, stacks of loose pages, even knotted quipu, the knot-based system of writing used by the Incas.

In bringing her gift-book into being, Niedecker could have selected a different calendar or note-pad as her housing; or she could have written in a smaller or larger script than she did (the scale of handwriting being almost infinitely available to modification); or she could have written what she “had in mind,” in Robinson’s phrase, on large pieces of paper, then cut carefully just around the completed texts. Instead, she chose to appropriate the pages of the Favorite Sunlit Road Pocket Calendar for 1935. She selected the narrow column of space—packed with words at first but refreshed to blankness by her cut-and-pasted scrap paper—as her operative page. Furthermore, there is a subtle but irreducible sovereignty involved in negotiating, moment-by-moment, the page-space as a determining factor that might *intermingle with* other “internal” determining factors of image and prosody. That is to say, we cannot assume that a given page of verse took form as a stream in the mind and was then subsequently deposited into some physical space, that each poem has a true, complete, *a priori* content and shape which then have to suffer sundry unfortunate impingements of embodiment—letterform, margins, paper, binding, page size, ink tone.

Such physical facts and parameters can themselves become vital, generative factors in how someone’s words take form as writing. For example, consider the first poem in “Next Year”:



If Niedecker had initially begun to write the phrase “Wade all *things* backward,” she might have realized as she completed writing “all” that “things” would not likely fit. She might have then sought a shorter word, like “life,” that would still carry the necessary force of her thought. Or, since that first line begins at an indent, perhaps Niedecker had already conceived the first line as it now stands and thus wanted to distribute its three words evenly across the page space. The end result of this and many other subtle decisions is a text whose right and also left margins are gently serrated, evincing the writer’s evident agency of arrangement and also, as an extension of that, suggesting the countless ways the same poem could have been rendered differently, through major or minor adjustments.

Such hypothesizing does not yield any positive conclusions about Niedecker's intentions or text, nor does it aim for anything so definite. Looking closely at how her words are arranged, though, and considering ways she might have put them into those places in moments of writing, keeps alive for the reader the notion of the writer's deliberate *use* of some space. The small poem is a text that someone has written and shaped just so, with and *for* the pages chosen. Which is not at all to say that chance or limit have been dissolved from the equation; it is rather to say that, in cases like these, chance and limit ought not be seen only negatively as accidental or constraining, but as propitious elements the writer has incorporated conscientiously into the whole fact of each poem. Susan Howe has argued cogently along these same lines regarding the manuscripts of Emily Dickinson's poems and letters.<sup>68</sup>

It is no easy thing to read the chopped-up line configurations of "Next Year" as both *intended* and also suffused with *accident*. Before such a view, the visual-syntactical significance of the texts may seem to become more indeterminate than ever, abandoned by the critic in favor of the poems' images, semantics, and rhetoric. My efforts here are merely to refuse to assume that either chance or purposiveness can be dismissed, so that the maximum amount and liveliest kind of attention can be directed to Niedecker's written material in its particularity, its actual form and condition. Let us return, then, to the first "Next Year" poem, which in its entirety runs as follows:

Wade all life  
backward to its  
source which  
runs too far  
ahead.

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<sup>68</sup> Primarily in *My Emily Dickinson* and *The Birth-mark*.

Here I have attempted to display the text in a passable approximation of its handwritten form (although the stretch and feel of the cursive words—the way the pen, for instance, after writing the *r* in “far” trails out to create a sort of dash—can’t be mimicked in typeface, as another glance at the manuscript makes clear), in order to convey a basic sense of the poem’s distinctive imprint, a form, as should be evident, that is not *merely* determined by the page’s boundaries. The configuration of the words clearly bespeaks the discretion of mind and hand. Any number of variant configurations with the very same words might be imagined for the same page space. Each page-bound text in “Next Year” manifests a similar sort of imprint, a shape related to its page size but owing most to, and powerfully intimating, the hands that marked that slip of paper in precisely that way.

In Elizabeth Robinson’s vision of these page-spaces as “delimiting” and “constraining,” one detects an anxious undertone, a streak of latent claustrophobia or at least a gentle but firm bias against small, enclosed spaces. To be fair, her assessment of “Next Year’s” cramped spaces is not as monolithic as the passages quoted above might indicate. In fact, soon after describing the tiny pages with a negative cast, Robinson writes that close study of the poems’ words reveals “how adeptly Niedecker used the boundaries of her page to channel her ideas; the lines are carefully enjambed to highlight tensions and so concentrate the movement of the poem” (*sic* 120). Nonetheless, her essay’s predominating focus on lyric versus narrative poetics and on the concepts of time that correspond to either mode, does a minor disservice to “Next Year’s” evident engagement with *space* and with material.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Strangely, Robinson never fully acknowledges the *pastiche* dimension of “Next Year,” the fact that Niedecker placed her own texts directly on top of the calendar’s words; reading Robinson’s essay, where she introduces “Next Year” simply as a piece where the poet “writes her way through a pocket calendar” (118), one would think the calendar was selected because it presented little blank spaces for writing, which is not the case. This work of Niedecker’s is not special because it enacts the novel idea of “taking the known quantity of the year and filling its motion with text and its text with motion” (124); this particular calendar *already was* loaded down with text, little

The work in question is not, in the main, a treatise on the dichotomies of temporality but a sheaf of poetic speech acts whose tones and references are mischievously varied and wide-ranging. My approach here differs from Robinson's in regard not only to textual space and line deployment but also in regard to the significant themes, images, and concerns Niedecker weaves through "Next Year." I see in the work a ringing endorsement, by way of demonstration not discourse, of verbal play; an assertion of the value—sometimes funny, sometimes melancholic, but always real—of the fragmentary in experience and language; and an affirmative, pragmatic stance on meaning as such. Robinson, on the other hand, sees mainly an adversarial drama involving agonized verbal movements thrusting into or out of time, and, tied to this, a revelation of the ultimate falsity or feebleness of language, experience, and generally, meaning:

Overall, the sequence that comprises the whole poem works self-consciously to delve into and decipher time but its conclusions are expressed ambivalently, especially as played out against the inexorable onward movement of the calendar.

...

The circularity of time and narrative build to a rather painful irony... The entity in question becomes time's relation to meaning, but meaning itself is portrayed as merely habitual, its "fact" as ineffectual.

...

It appears that the circular shape of the poem draws in upon itself in such a way that it cuts off, so to speak, its own circulation.

...

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clichéd aphoristic morsels. Niedecker's poetics here, then, might better be understood as calculated mischief with the notion of discrete bits of wisdom than as a poetic discourse on time.

[T]he author can't seem to resist making a loop, no matter how spurious its indication of inclusion or completion would be. (121-124)

When Robinson explicates the first page of “Next Year,” cited above, her reading is hampered by the overly rigid a priori commitment, charted above, to theorizing the inescapable and unhappy circularity of time, the “drag” of narrative cycling. Thus she argues that the words of that first piece—“Wade all life / backward...”—are a kind of declarative proposition that “disrupts the general assumption of life as moving forward with the counterintuitive statement that it ‘wades’ backward” (120). What is initially most striking about this reading is that it seems to misconstrue completely the grammar of the sentence, as if the poem read “All life wades / backwards.” In fact, the poem does not offer a paradoxical declaration to the reader about life flowing in reverse; instead, the reader is immediately implicated in a command: “*Wade* all life / backward to its / source.” The difference is critical. The verb of injunction, “wade” (importantly, for a poet so deeply connected to water,<sup>70</sup> the *incipit* of the whole book), first strikes the mind sharply not as a disruption but as an evocative possibility. Wading is a unique, almost synaesthetic experience of the sights, sounds, and tactile sensations of partial immersion; it implies deliberate movement through some liminal shallows. On top of this, the verb gains further complexity because it is trebly transitive, the action falling on an object, its direction, and its destination. A command like “Wade *in* the back-flowing waters of life” would have accorded preeminence to the wading subject and a single, defined *locus*. As they’re written, the lines conceive wading rather as the careful leading or carrying *of* something else *along* some course, *toward* a telos, even if that telos proves to be out of reach (“too far ahead”).

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<sup>70</sup> Niedecker lived most of her life along the flood-prone mouth of the Rock River.

To be told at the outset of a book, matter-of-factly to carry, “all life” down or back through half-watery zones until its mysteriously elusive source has been (almost) reached is a fantastic charge; that is, literally, an extra-ordinary task and also a fun little jolt. There is indeed in this first poem some disrupting of assumptions, as Robinson notes, but not through the propositional manner she claims. The poem simply does not in any way “state” that “[life] ‘wades’ backward.” The words are not in the form of a statement.<sup>71</sup>

This way of imputing a trenchant skepticism to the speaker of the first poem initiates an interpretive slant that Robinson holds to throughout her reading of the “Next Year” pieces. To her eyes, the poems throughout articulate, as a prominent theme, a critical, negative view of meaning and “folktime,” which are both regarded as “constricting” components of narrative temporality, redundancies and repetitions that the speaker struggles to transcend through “lyrical” gestures of language (“Her embrace of a hollowness also marks her resistance to the ‘folktime’ that the year is exposed as being” [124].) The plainest example of this bias is perhaps seen in Robinson’s reading of the fourth poem in the series:

If you circle  
the habit of  
your meaning,  
it’s fact and  
no harm  
done. (44)

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<sup>71</sup> If we go beyond grammar, though, even brief attention to the poem’s prosody reminds us that this text is constructed more to compel attention to itself than to invoke a separable and paraphraseable, aphoristic meaning. If scanned rigidly, the verses here would have to be called iambic, but that rhythm doesn’t become evident until the final clause beginning with “which.” The three words that begin the poem as its first line, three stark monosyllables arranged as an imperative, cannot but be read as three strong stresses, or perhaps as one half stress followed by a spondaic foot—“Wāde *all life*.” The prosody of the whole poem leans toward iambic feet but also invites a sprung rhythm (to invoke Hopkins, a poet Niedercker much admired).

Robinson cites this piece in conjunction with “Next Year’s” second poem, which, she argues, “equates the passage of time...with nullity” (121). In the fourth poem she sees the same point “restated after a fashion”:

The entity in question becomes time’s relation to meaning, but meaning itself is portrayed as merely habitual, its “fact” as ineffectual. Additionally, “meaning” belongs in this articulation to “you,” not the narrator of the poem. (121)

The first problem here is how summarily and abruptly “time” is muscled into the picture. The word *habit* does indeed imply the passage of time, but it also implies a great many other things—the array of objects, feelings, places, and associations that pertain to daily behavior, daily patterns. It cannot be so easily exchanged for the word “time.” And just because the word “habit” is used, to say that the poem’s “entity” *is* a grand metaphysical abstraction—“time’s relation to meaning”—is highly equivocal; the abstruse formulation overpowers and obscures the poem’s plainer, more playful, and more manifold significances.

As with “Next Year’s” first poem, what the speaker commands or imagines “you” doing here is mainly fanciful, not propositional. I’m not sure exactly how to go about “circling the habit of my meaning,” but the prospect has no damning or ominous shadows hanging immediately over it. Though habit and meaning are abstract terms (the latter more so than the former), the poem grammatically consolidates them as a specific, subjective relation—“*the habit of your meaning*”—and makes the situation playfully familiar by picturing that composite entity as something subject to being circled, by the hand as if on paper, or by the whole person when, say, walking all the way around a sculpture.<sup>72</sup> Like wading, circling is a thing one actually might

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<sup>72</sup> I cannot help but think here of William James’ celebrated illustration, in the second *Pragmatism* lecture, of the metaphysical complications that come to the fore when one creature is “circling” around and studying another: The corpus of the dispute was a squirrel – a live squirrel supposed to be clinging to one side of a tree-trunk; while over against the tree’s opposite side a human being was imagined to stand. This human

do, with ease and pleasure, and the image inflects the whole poem. To tell the reader casually that her own meaning and habits—concepts usually felt to be elusive and confounding—can be directly engaged as an objectified thing is to imagine a lively and living relation between mind and matter. Proposing the “circling”—annotating, studying, or stalking—of the abstract in one’s own experience is playfully propitious, not critical. Robinson, ironically neglecting entirely here the injunction to circle, roundly asserts that “meaning itself” is denigrated in the poem—“portrayed as merely habitual,” “ineffectual,” and belonging only “in this articulation to ‘you,’ not to the narrator of the poem” (121). Such a claim, in each of its parts, is refutable.

First, the poem makes no claim about “meaning itself,” that is, meaning in a general or absolute metaphysical sense. The speaker instead refers to local, possessed meaning, “*your* meaning,” which is, implicitly, only one instance or type of meaning among many possible instances or types. The second and perhaps more problematic move in Robinson’s reading is the foisting of a pejorative sense onto the notion of habit invoked by the poem. To use some version of the phrase “habit of . . . meaning” in no way equates with a judgment of meaning as “*merely* habitual.” These are radically different expressions. The negative epithet “merely” is not at all a given when it comes to habit, but an additional term applied to express a positional skepticism about habit, a skepticism that is not actually present in the poem. To say that some particular meaning *has* a habit—the “habit *of* your meaning”—is merely to say that it manifests and ramifies in certain ways over time, just like any other idea or thing in the world. Niedecker’s phrase is an inversion of the more expected formulation, “the meaning of your habit,” where habit is the given fact whose meaning must be posited. Robinson assumes “habitual” means

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witness tries to get sight of the squirrel by moving rapidly round the tree, but no matter how fast he goes, the squirrel moves as fast in the opposite direction, and always keeps the tree between himself and the man, so that never a glimpse of him is caught. The resultant metaphysical problem now is this: *Does the man go round the squirrel or not?* He goes round the tree, sure enough, and the squirrel is on the tree; but does he go round the squirrel? (22).

“ineffectual,” but citing the habit of something is precisely an acknowledgement that that thing *occurs*, creates rippling perturbations—effects—somewhere. The habit of my meaning may not be effective or efficacious toward a given end, but it is, *ipso facto*, “effectual.”

Finally, interpreting this poem as unreservedly critical of meaning is belied by the form of the speech act itself. The poem’s speaker presents the *habit-meaning-circling* scenario only as a hypothesis, a condition. *If* you perform this action, address your own life thusly, something will be the case. The poem’s only real declaration, then, is not embedded in its first half but plainly stated in its second half, the independent clause that completes the sentence: “it’s fact and / no harm / done.” And that statement, though condensed and colloquial and thus subtly recalcitrant, is reassuring, not lamentational, with regard to the consequence of circling the habit of one’s meaning. Arriving at a fact or achieving facticity while avoiding harm is a felicitous outcome, however far-fetched or abstract. At the same time, Niedecker’s words cannot be taken purely at face value, as some profession of naïve optimism. For instance, there is indeed a tinge of subtle irony in the final clause, a sort of glibness that gives pause: is the speaker trustworthy or a winking fast-talker? Reductive readings of the affirmative sort are also unsettled by the ambiguity of the word *it* here. What exactly is it that “is” (becomes, or amounts to) “fact”? The word “meaning” is the nearest antecedent, but “habit” is the more direct object of the verb “circle.” More vaguely, “it” could be read as standing for the whole situation or complex pictured in the conditional clause; that is, the event itself of circling meaning’s habit is being characterized as fact. The poem can even be read as a reflexive comment on its own materialization, a word on poetics. In that case, the act of inscribing words onto a small page is, figuratively, a “circling” of one’s meaning-habits, and the consequent page-text itself is the fact in question, a discrete object.

In any case, the final clause's indeterminacies and complexities as well as its persuasive, reassuring directness attach to the same fact: compressed monosyllabic vernacular. By using colloquial speech in the form of succinct, sharp flashes—short, enjambed lines—Niedecker can say something without having to elaborate on it, or defend it, or even *mean* it, exactly. Or, to somewhat reverse the formulation, through plain “folk-speech” she can foreground the oddness and pleasure and polysemic materiality of words themselves as they occur in use, while yet saying *something*. The words of “Next Year” are given as coherent phrases and clauses, not as atomized signs collaged together, as is the case in Niedecker's tri-partite experiment “Canvass.” Though they are all articulate, the memos in “Next Year” run a mischievous gamut of speech acts, sometimes gesturing toward the propositional mode, as here, at other times invoking a historical fact through naming (“Van Gogh's / ‘Bar’—” begins one poem), or creating a memorable though mysterious figuration (“The monster died / of his last breath, / ate a honey and / grew waxen” (54). Plain, spare language can efficiently fuse *rapprochement* and *ostranenie*<sup>73</sup> in addressing the reader. For example, returning to the vital case at hand, the phrase “it's fact and / no harm / done” is both recognizable and curious, the rather imperious sound of the hard-stressed, harsh consonants in “it's *fact*” giving way to the soft, more lightly stressed vowels and consonants of the soothing colloquialism “no harm done.” The speaking voice that is conjured has a valid and placating tone, but the intense condensation of the whole clause, in tandem with the severed-and-stacked textual configuration of lines, evinces a countervailing brusqueness and prompts the mind to snag on the words themselves, as things—their sounds, shapes, connotations, and so on.

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<sup>73</sup> This is the well-known Russian word, used by Viktor Shlovsky in his theory of aesthetic forms, that is usually translated as “estrangement.”

In spite of all the foregoing acknowledgements of complexity in Niedecker's small poetics circa "Next Year," though, there is no sound way to read this particular poem as presenting "[meaning]'s 'fact' as ineffectual" (121), unless "doing harm" is somehow construed as a cynical code-term for "effectual" (thus not doing harm would be ineffectual). As this text is a poem, its very liveliness derives from ambiguities and irreducible relations. But, if it is to be given *any* consideration regarding its ideas, as it is in Robinson, the piece ought to be considered in the full and exact form in which it appears, which is unequivocally the form of an affirmative. The poem imagines a coherent, harm-skirting triangulation between habit, meaning, and fact.<sup>74</sup>

In Peirce's "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," we find the following explicit claim about how meaning and habit are inextricably and felicitously joined:

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<sup>74</sup> What I want to suggest here, specifically, is that Niedecker, in braiding together the words *habit*, *meaning*, and *fact* in a single small poem, articulates a canny—though deceptively flippant-sounding—version of some of Charles Sanders Peirce's core pragmatist theses. The so-called pragmatic maxim itself, although it doesn't use the three words in question, speaks to the same ideas and does so in a form echoed by Niedecker's poem:

Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object. (124)

The first sentence, asking the reader to "consider what effects..." corresponds to the conditional clause in Niedecker's poem, "If you circle the habit of your meaning." The second sentence above, the result ("Then..."), corresponds to the concluding clause in the poem—"it's fact and / no harm / done"—both statements hinging on a use of the verb *is* to arrive somewhere. There are, of course, important differences here that must be noted. Peirce's formulation proposes that by attending to, or "circling" we might say, the aggregate effects and bearings—the *habits*—the mind finds attached to some conceived object—a *fact*—one can grasp the *meaning* of that object-directed thought. On the other hand, it is as if Niedecker's poem formulates a follow-up corollary to the maxim. Instead of taking "the object of our conception" as the premise, she begins where Peirce ends, with "our conception of...effects," that is, with meaning, "your meaning."

If, imagines the poem, you have recognized or arrived at some meaning such that it "belongs" to you, and you then carefully consider *its* operations, its possible effects and bearings, you will again arrive at a meaning, which is itself a new fact. Such a formulation, where some meaning is the predicate, happens to accord with Peirce's description of ongoing triadic semiosis, outlined in the preceding chapter. To recapitulate, when someone attends to something, an object, that object is represented to the mind in the form of a sign (a word, for instance, or a physical image, either representing the object as an icon, index, or symbol); the mind responsively conceives its own sign, an interpretant, that corresponds to both the object in question as well as to the sign representing it. It is the hatching of interpretants that constitutes "thirdness," the mind's crucial capacity to grasp relations, patterns, laws, in sum, *meanings*. Of course this does not happen in an instant, an abstract triadic synchrony, but over time. When the mind conceives an interpretant in response to a sign, that interpretant is then fluidly converted into a new sign (representation) that relates to a new object, both of which, in turn, engender a new interpretant.

[T]he whole function of thought is to produce habits of action... To develop [thought's] meaning, we have, therefore, simply to determine what habits it produces, for *what a thing means is simply what habits it involves*. (SW 123, emphasis added)

Niedecker's "Next Year" poem enunciates an idea remarkably harmonious to this fundament of pragmatism, a thought that almost seems to stem directly from writings of William James or Peirce, a curious offshoot more elliptical and more directly aesthetic than theirs but of the same root system. As I state above, "Next Year Or I Fly My Rounds, Tempestuous" runs a gamut of voices, references, styles, and speech-acts, only one of which is the philosophical. If anything, the book ultimately demonstrates an exuberant, determined *abandoning* of the philosophical mode, with its demands of scrupulous rhetoric, discursiveness, and prolixity. However true that may be of the work as a whole, though, "Next Year" contains several salient moments in which its words coalesce into thematic or axiomatic claims. Gertrude Stein provides a helpful reminder that these occasionally surfacing declarations, like the one ruminated on above, should still be considered for their content-validity, no matter how oblique or "poetic" their form and context.

Niedecker, like Stein, tests language by rendering it as de-familiarized material. Stein tends to use repetition and protraction to this end, whereas Niedecker tends to use elision, vernacular, and textual smallness. But even though both writers show allegiance to more experimental concerns with the raw, elusive properties of language, they do not forego statement altogether. In the midst of *Tender Buttons* the reader finds the tersely potent statement

“Build is all right.” Or consider *Stanzas in Meditation*, a notoriously “opaque”<sup>75</sup> series of poems, which nonetheless contains such glittering, reliable phrases as:

And in a way there is no repose (3)  
 ...  
 But it is I that put a cloak on him (5)  
 ...  
 They thought quietly... (7)  
 ...  
 Made it be in no sense other than exchange (8)  
 ...  
 All may be glory may be may be glory (8)  
 ...  
 All who come will will come or come to be (9)  
 ...  
 It is lost. (10)

Stein scholars readily acknowledge and use such statements as ingenuous *ars poetica* touchstones, and the same approach is in order with Niedecker. On the one hand, it would not be possible or just to read Niedecker’s entire oeuvre as if it were philosophy. On the other hand, when a conspicuous statement about experience or reality or language is encountered, to refuse summarily to consider its validity because it is “just poetry” is to do Niedecker a disservice; it is yet another way her challenging work might be “tamed” and held in the safer, more convenient categories of folk artist, woman poet, regionalist, or even avant-gardist.

### **Firstness & Hands**

As regards meaning and habit, then, Niedecker makes at least one explicit claim (in “Next Year”) that holds up to scrutiny as legitimate and affirmative. Establishing that propositional case-in-point is a critical initial step in countering Elizabeth Robinson’s reading of the work as a constricted, agonized, ill-fated circle. At certain points, such as the piece dwelled

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<sup>75</sup> Janet Malcolm saddles it with the unfortunate and, I think, unjust characterization “austerely impenetrable” (58).

on above, “Next Year” overtly and candidly cites meaning, “folk-time,” and fact in ways that exhibit no salient skepticism or *agon* at all. The stronger argument, though, for an alternative view of the whole book, emerges from the work’s patent variety, playfulness, and *sui generis* constructedness, features associated with Peircian firstness. Meaning and habit, as I have shown, are connected to the category of thirdness in Peirce’s thought. Even though it occasionally *refers to* these higher-order concepts of thirdness, mostly “Next Year” *demonstrates*, traffics directly in, and thus gives an impression of, Firstness, the category in which, for Peirce, aesthetics is embedded.

The only other poem in the group that uses the word “meaning” provides an apt pivot by which to move into the work’s chancier, freer, less scrutable poetics. The twelfth poem reads:

The trouble  
is : this stirs  
a real mean-  
ing.  
Humanity  
is engaged—  
on equal burial. (52)

This poem begins *in medias res*. We are thrust into a definite but completely veiled circumstance, as indicated by the article and pronoun: “*the* trouble...*this* stirs.” Like an obverse of “no harm done”—which reassures, but almost too casually—“the trouble is,” as a phrase, officially cites some problem, but its colloquial tone belies any great urgency. We almost immediately take it as a figure of speech, especially upon reading the vague but benign-seeming specification: “this stirs / a real mean- / ing.” The statement recalls “if you circle the habit of your meaning,” the verb “stirs” here carrying the same familiar but multivalent weight as “circle” (stirs it awake? around?

to the surface?) The idea of trouble, though, declared so plainly at the outset, does cast a riddling shadow over the entire piece, a shadow confirmed in but not clarified by the final word “burial.” However, with the exception of that tenuous tonal resonance, the second part of the poem sits at the bottom of the page with no clear connection to the first part.

There is a palpable discrepancy between one sentence and the next, a sudden swerve into the surreal and ominous. The statement “Humanity / is engaged— ,” ending as it does with a dash and thus possessing a degree of independence, almost suggests some cosmic betrothal (since “is engaged,” by itself, is most commonly used with such a meaning); and then things get stranger when the clause is qualified with the final line’s prepositional phrase. Usually, a (non-betrothed) subject is said to be “engaged in” some activity. Here, then, “on” is unfamiliar and adds to the stiling effect created with the long interruptive dash (in its particular form and function here, recalling Dickinson). The final term “equal burial” elucidates nothing, pressing onto the mind instead its own memorable sound-form—a trochaic foot slant-rhymed with a dactyl, with the hard “kw” of the *q* complementing the labial push of the *b* and the two *l* endings. The reader conjectures relations between this last sentence and the poem’s first—perhaps humanity is engaged in, part of, the trouble of meaning-stirring; perhaps “a real meaning” is implicitly the burial compared to which humanity’s engagement is “equal”; perhaps there is a suggestion that humanity’s *equal* burial stands in contrast to the *unequal* burial of stirring up real meanings—but there is no evident continuity or harmony between the two. “The trouble is: this stirs a real meaning,” though cryptic in its pointings, is a coherent and affirmative statement: it categorically allows that meanings are real and that something (“this”) can move or enliven them. “Humanity is engaged—on equal burial,” on the other hand, is an obscure and foreboding gesture, a calmly rendered but indecipherable diagnosis from some oracle.

Notwithstanding the trace of a tonal link between “trouble” and “burial,” the poem’s two parts are juxtaposed almost as separate persons, as if the second part was written long after the first and then simply placed with it as a companion.

The broader two-part parataxis in this poem, the disjunction, specifically the swerve away from clear language and into evocation, is representative of what Niedecker in “Next Year” tends to do persistently throughout, from line to line and even from word to word. Though the poems occasionally speak directly and coherently, foregrounding some digestible content—“To give / heat is within / the control of / every human / being” (43)—the predominant force at work is a pull toward the fanciful, the skewed, and the suggestively fractured and fragmentary. Here are a few of the more lively specimens attesting to such a force:

Sweet ears,  
attentive, not  
too loud to risk,  
rest them in a  
madrigal bal-  
cony above  
any purpose  
for not. (49)

That’s sweet  
on a target—  
nobody’d know  
the ham line.  
Holes are too  
late nowa –  
days. One  
freak ass to  
wire. (52)

I can always  
 go back to  
 fertilization,  
 kimonos, wrap-  
 around and  
 diatribes. (48)

As the mind moves from one splintery line to the next, it keeps getting tumbled off in unexpected directions. The cognitive movements involved in connecting “nobody’d know” to “the ham line” and “Holes are too” to “late nowa –” are *leaps*, provisional imaginative fusions formalized and enhanced by the enjambed line breaks. Even by itself, such heavy syncopation (if used to chop up a news report, for instance) requires the mind to “make sense” in a more halting, recursive way. Likewise, the words Niedecker uses above, by themselves, if written out in long, unbroken lines, would still challenge the mind with their ambiguities and their shifts in reference and register. The way form and material work *in tandem* in “Next Year,” as constitutive of rigorously contained texts (never breaching their allotted pages), is what makes the poems such illustrious instances of one species within the small poem genus. Thus Niedecker cannily exploits the tiny spaces in “Next Year” to create intensified disjunctive reveries. In so doing she engages in a form of verbal play, making use of chance by stringing together words that *happen to* come to mind (upon the refusing of expected, familiar follow-up words) regardless of their coherence, and also by allowing margin-forced line breaks repeatedly to occasion redirections of thought.

These practices accord with the Peircean category of Firstness, a mode of being and also of experience, which is identified most simply with “spontaneity” and with “possibility” (*CP*

3.422, 1.531). Peirce's elaborations on the concept make clear its vital interrelation to aesthetic forms, processes, and effects:

The idea of First is predominant in the ideas of freshness, life, freedom...

Freedom can only manifest itself in unlimited and uncontrolled variety and multiplicity; and thus the first becomes predominant in the ideas of measureless variety and multiplicity.

...

It is not in being separated from qualities that Firstness is most predominant, but in being something peculiar and idiosyncratic. The first is predominant in feeling, as distinct from objective perception, will, and thought. (*CP* 1.302)

Elsewhere, Peirce identifies Firstness with Chance, which is posited, along with "Law" and "Habit-taking," as one of the prime evolutionary forces in the world. Unlike his positivist counterparts in philosophy and the sciences, for whom chance was only a sort of illusion, a name given to as-yet undiscovered deterministic laws, Peirce advances the view that chance is not only a real, positively existent force but that it conduces to new orders, forms, and possibilities. Chance and law spin against each other, but not at cross-purposes; where raw force is ultimately "dissipative," tending toward a void state of equilibrium, chance is ultimately generative and "concentrative," supplying the necessary conditions for things to coalesce around the limiting factors of law and habit ("Design and Chance," *EP* 215-224).

Talk of chance and of firstness in relation to these passages, excerpted as they are from Peirce's vast, careful, and thoroughgoing oeuvre of thought, is necessarily abstract, but it should be clear how such a category is experienced by conscious individuals: in the form of raw

feelings, mere inklings, glimpsed potentialities, savors, and vague but concrete *moods*.<sup>76</sup> More actively, a person may engage in what Peirce calls “sporting” (*SW* 2:272), acting and playing with signs experimentally but not systematically. Such play springs spontaneously but also can be gathered by “habit-taking” (that crucial third, mediating force in the universe). With “Next Year,” Niedecker demonstrates a type of sporting verbal play in the form of a habit, represents it tangibly *as* a habit: a discrete series (to allude proleptically to Oppen) of similar, scrupulously crafted but useless page-inscriptions. The work is a materialization of what Peirce calls, in highest praise, “The Play of Musement”:

There is a certain agreeable occupation of mind which, from its having no distinctive name, I infer is not as commonly practiced as it deserves to be; for indulged in moderately—say through some five to six per cent of one's waking time, perhaps during a stroll—it is refreshing enough more than to repay the expenditure. Because *it involves no purpose save that of casting aside all serious purpose*, I have sometimes been half-inclined to call it reverie with some qualification; but for a frame of mind so antipodal to vacancy and dreaminess such a designation would be too excruciating a misfit. In fact, it is Pure Play. Now, Play, we all know, is a lively exercise of one's powers. *Pure Play has no rules, except this very law of liberty. It bloweth where it listeth. It has no purpose, unless recreation.* The particular

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<sup>76</sup> This word, so critical to Emerson and William James, might seem out of place in a discussion of such small works. Music or longer, ongoing works of prose or poetry have the undisputed power to affect the mind and body, to array a space of time with a certain ambient *feeling* that comes into being precisely because the attending person has been in thrall to the music or prose for a sustained period of time. We might think of artists like James himself, and Emerson, Whitman, Dante, or Bach. These have *sweep*; they sweep the reader/listener into a rhythmically transfigured state that has tempo. On the other hand, one of Niedecker's “Next Year” poems are too spare, too abrupt, to allow any momentum or tempo to build up in the reader; they seem more likely to interrupt a mood than create one. A lyric poem, traditionally, is thought of as conjuring a state or mood similar to what is engendered by prose, albeit a shorter one. To read an ode by John Keats or Donne, for instance, or to read *any* finely wrought sonnet is to become absorbed in “following” the tightly coiled lines of thought through their tortuous course, such that discursive and evocative meanings congeal into a kind of mood, a psychological complex that corresponds to the artifactual complex.

occupation I mean—a petite bouchée with the Universes—may take either *the form of aesthetic contemplation*, or that of distant castle-building (whether in Spain or within one's own moral training), or that of considering some wonder in one of the Universes, or some connection between two of the three, with speculation concerning its cause. (*CP* 6.458-9, “Neglected Argument”)

A qualification is necessary here regarding *pure* play, since Niedecker's poems may not seem to fall inside the definition. Peirce uses this descriptor here to emphasize contentiously that absolute Chance, real Firstness, is involved in such “musement.” In fluid, purposeless, rule-free daydreams and casual speculations Firstness is the ascendant category of experience, and so the reverie is in a sense pure. As soon as one begins to convert some reverie into an essay, though, or sit down to a chess match, the mind-play itself loses its purity, even though “Pure Play” still presses from underneath the rule-structured game in question, waits in the wings for the next hiatus, that it might take over once more. Games—including those that use words, like writing—can proceed from, involve, or provoke pure play, but they cannot be equal to it.

Games and pure play are distinct because if we are speaking strictly, adhering to Peirce's delineations, any representation or relation at all, that is, any conscious use of signs, revokes and supplants a condition of *pure* Firstness that had obtained (“The first must therefore be present and immediate, so as not to be second to a representation. ...It precedes all synthesis and all differentiation; it has no unity and no parts. It cannot be articulately thought” [*CP* 1.356-357]). Thus, since words, as such, are symbols, their presence necessarily creates triadic relations (between the word-signs themselves, the objects or operations indicated, and the interpretant thought-signs generated in the mind of the reader), thereby ushering Thirdness into the scene. The presence of thirdness would especially seem to be the case for written language, given how

concrete word-forms are as symbolic objects. Nonetheless, a *sense* of Firstness, a gesture towards it, can still be evinced through written words, depending on how those words are arranged together and on the particular physical embodiment of the letterforms, the graphemes. Peirce acknowledges the significance of these more immediate, self-referential aspects of word-signs:

Since a sign is not identical with the thing signified, but differs from the latter in some respects, it must plainly have some *characters which belong to it in itself, and have nothing to do with its representative function*. These I call the *material* qualities of the sign. As examples of such qualities, take in the word “man,” its consisting of three letters—in a picture, its being round and flat and without relief. (“Some Consequences” 53, emphasis added)

Because they “have nothing to do with [the sign’s] representative function,” such material qualities are connected to Firstness. A word, like any object, can have a “feel”; likewise, sequences or groups of words, when arranged into certain unusual configurations, can send the mind towards vague perplexity and curious imagining rather than toward firm knowledge of a logical meaning. *Pure* Firstness and *Pure* Play are not, therefore, the main concerns in reading “Next Year or I Fly My Rounds, Tempestuous,” except as categorical reference points, since we are fully in the realm of linguistic sign-use and sign-interpretation. We can, however, identify play and Firstness as they are insinuated through Niedecker’s language: in its “material qualities”—the composite fact that it only appears *in the form of sui generis* handwritten lettering and single-page collections of fragmented lines—and also in its musing, sporting speech acts themselves, where enunciative phrasings, no matter how plain or how odd their few constituent words, are like the confided verbalizations of Peirce’s Muser, whose thought “has no rules,” but

rather “bloweth where it listeth”; whose primary if not only purpose seems to be “recreation.” The poems are not well-formed structures that show forth the principles of either conventional or modernist doctrines but *mischievous little outbursts*, inscribed utterances that invite re-readings even as they refuse to accommodate any crystallized interpretation of their general or final meaning.

When Niedecker writes, in the series’ final poem,

Jesus , I’m  
going out  
and throw  
my arms  
around . (67)

she is, in the main, neither stating or restating any thesis, presenting a “small machine made of words,” nor conjuring a scene or epiphany of any discernible kind. It is rather a terse, discrete declaration of an unexplained intention, rendered as a tempered colloquial exclamation. One might expand and *rephrase* the first part of the utterance, with a view to clarifying the basic sense—“I plan to go outside in order to throw,” etc.—but the text as a whole cannot really be summarized. It is both too obvious and too elliptical for a summary. Is “Jesus” being addressed, or is the name invoked in an exclamatory way? If the latter, is this an exhausted cry or an excited, frivolous one? Where is “out”? Why is the speaker impelled or compelled to go out to perform such an apparently superfluous act as throwing her arms around? What might such an action look like? Work, play, madness? Insofar as these lines are captivating, and thus significant, it is because they are so bent on announcing a whim, a thought and potential action that isn’t obliged to answer to questions about reasons or specifics or meanings.

My reading of this final “Next Year” poem (and the whole series) as evincing firstness is not, as I hope should be clear, a claim that words here are *free from* or *outside of* the fundamental operations of linguistic semantics. This poem points to firstness so effectively—it carries such curiously compressed ambiguity—*because* it presents a fundamentally legible speech-act. The idea of “throwing something around” (a ball, for example, or some bird seed) basically makes sense; the poem uses this recognizable idea in conjunction with recognizable, albeit compressed and colloquial, grammar to present a situation that *isn’t* recognizable or clear. The poem invites the reader “right in” through shared, traceable structures of verbal meaning, only to shift and riddle and suggest several significances rather than resolve into *a* meaning.

The fact that Niedecker so cannily *uses*—works with and through (though not exactly, I would argue, “within”)—signifying linguistic codes toward aesthetic ends, just as she *uses* small page-fields, is at the heart of my notion of an experimentally “realist” small poetry. She works with thirdness—conventional symbolic meanings, or what Saussure famously categorized as the workings of a given “*langue*,” a systematic linguistic structure—as a means of conveying firstness. Considering these things in connection to the final “Next Year” poem brings me back to my running disagreement with Elizabeth Robinson. Here, as with “Next Year”’s first poem and the poem about “circling the habit of one’s meaning,” Robinson misses or misconstrues the speech-act itself, as it is written, wrenching the words to fit an *a priori* hermeneutical narrative.

Robinson’s interpretation of the poem above runs as follows; she sees the speaker attempting, according to her just “prerogative,” “to confront the circuit of the year by definitively leaving it. Yet the impulse is then to turn around and grasp it, hold it” (124). The primary problem here is that there is emphatically no such “it” in Niedecker’s poem. The poem’s speaker specifically announces a *disengagement from* locatable or transitive actions. She is simply “going *out*”; she will

throw her arms “*around*.” The prerogative the poem claims is that of *not saying* where *from* or *to* one is “going out,” and of *not having* to attempt to put your body “around” any particular *thing* at all. The speaker doesn’t attempt to “hold” anything in the poem; her implicit “impulse” is centrifugal, performative, gratuitous—the antithesis of attempts to “grasp.”

Robinson misses this meaning because, as with the phrase “Wade all life / backwards,” she reads the poem’s words not primarily as a whole utterance but as a collage of atomized hieroglyphs she is at liberty to interpret in new ways. The phrase “going out,” even the mere word “out,” seem to be enough to warrant an elaborate imputation of a desire to “confront” and “definitively leave” the “circuit of the year.” Likewise, the words “arms / around” are unaccountably taken to mean an attempted clutching, as that notion provides a suitable conclusion to Robinson’s melodramatic narrative of a tragic, doomed struggle against time. Even if we entertain this possibility, there is nothing in the poem about “turning around” to throw arms around what one has gone out *from*, as Robinson alleges. In “I’m / going out / *and* throw...”, “and” plainly means something along the lines of “in order to” or “and then”; claiming that the speaker *turns* or desires to turn in the poem is purely unfounded, an idea imposed according to an extrinsic interpretive agenda. Here is what Robinson ultimately finds in the poem in question:

[W]ithin the “arms around” there is an emptiness, a lacunae which constricts and above which the narrator may have to rise in order to survive...Niedecker offers her version of the story of that year. Her *embrace of a hollowness* also marks her resistance to the “folk-time” that the year is exposed as being. (124, emphasis added)

Where is this putative “embrace of hollowness?” Robinson here reads so much more, or we might better say “less,” than is viably *there* in the poem. The language simply doesn’t support or sustain such a reading.<sup>77</sup>

I’m laboring here against the tendency—especially common in readings of enigmatic small poems—to replace the dense stuff of a text or a group of texts, the irreducible complexes of associations and gestures, with some narrative or a discourse, that is, *a meaning*. Elizabeth Robinson’s essay, as I have said earlier, makes an astute inquiry into lyric and narrative tensions—that is, as she rightly points out, temporal tensions—that do indeed run through the poems, but her own method for accomplishing this inquiry entirely skews toward the side of narrative. She insists on calling the poems’ speaker “the narrator” and, her eye on the series’ final poem, she sees a completed trajectory, a “story of that year” (124). Instead of giving credence to the elliptical utterances themselves—such as “Jesus, I’m / going out / and throw / my arms / around”—she stamps her own stable, squared-off narrative over the lot of them. In response, I can’t help but cite Laura Riding’s familiar aphorism about the impulse to order and *solve* something puzzling: “A complicated problem is only further complicated by being

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<sup>77</sup> I find myself in the odd position here of arguing for the openness of a text—that state where its form and meanings have the fullest scope of possibilities—by arguing *against* a certain kind of too-open interpretative approach. Words are “arbitrary” only in the sense that they are not intrinsically connected to their referents (Peirce says “objects”), not in the sense that they are random floating particles, tractable to any interpretive mechanism. However slippery, words do have functional semantic and syntactic consistencies, created by the exponentially denser centers of their denotative and connotative meaning-clouds. It is not a question of either words or poems being absolutely fixed or absolutely free. Of course verbal meanings are not truly *fixed*, locked, in any way, but they do arise through linguistic forms: phrases, sequences, speech-acts. The reading of texts, like writing itself, is and ought to be *at liberty* to explore, test, invent, and multiply meanings. But *taking liberties* with a given text, selecting from and abstracting it willy-nilly to support a preexisting theory, submerges and *closes* the text, superimposing a reproducible gloss over its suggestive, grainy, irreducible surfaces. If those textual surfaces take the form of a legible phrase or clause, we should recognize as much, and then look to open and illuminate that complex, not pretend the words are a mere disjointed collage of ciphers. Of course some texts are proper collages of words, and poetry abounds in disjunctions and ambiguities; but each case differs from another, and words always operate through the forms and patterns in which they are arranged. Giving explicit assent to semantic meanings has nothing to do with metaphysics, crude notions of linguistic “instrumentality” or deterministic “referentiality”; and it certainly has nothing to do with trying to imagine a writer’s “real intentions.” It is simply a matter of pragmatic and good-faith poetic practices. For any given linguistic and/or textual instance, we acknowledge and investigate the *workings* of language there.

simplified. A state of confusion is never made comprehensible by being given a plot” (74).

Robinson, in a sense, neutralizes the small-poem strangeness inherent to “Next Year” by giving it a plot.

When we look at the final poem in the series just as it stands, as a discrete piece outside of any plot and not liable to or determined by any of the poems that precede it, it emerges as a mischievously arranged declaration of a mischievous activity. The circumstances of the utterance are undisclosed and its tone is ambiguous—whimsical? prayerful? genuinely exasperated?—but its implicit and explicit significances are those of firstness, that is, play, reverie, indeterminacy, possibility. The explicit content of the poem—throwing one’s arms *around*, rather than attempting to grasp some spectral thing—is a quintessential example of how one might *behave* according to a spirit of firstness: an unregulated, playful, nonteleological animation of the body—a dance without steps or music, a *fit*. Even before interpreting the poem’s sentence, and then *as* we read and re-read it, we experience an implicit playfulness in the patently constructed surface, the form, of the poem. The surface takes form partly as a voice—a compressed, exclamatory, fluid phrasing that is intimate and speech-oriented—but more so because the handwritten words are broken up and stacked the length of the little scrap-paper page.

Thus, whoever the speaker and whatever the referred-to activity is imagined to be, the poem *itself* is gesticulating curiously, throwing its own small arms around the page in the way it presents itself to our attention.<sup>78</sup>

Niedecker herself, in the 1930s and throughout her writing life, attests to endeavoring to make use of what Peirce affirms as an “element of irresponsible, free Originality” (*CP* 2.85) by

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<sup>78</sup> I have since considered the possibility that the phrase could be or could be considered an idiom for “doing work,” since arms are so strongly bound, synecdochically, to labor, and since manual labor, like death and other infelicitous facts of life, commonly engenders euphemistic and idiomatic language that lessens its mental ache.

means of constructivist textual practices. In a letter to *Poetry* magazine written earlier in 1934, she expresses her poetic ambition with unabashed verve:

...that I as a writer will portray my epoch and truthfully evoke life in its totalities only as I am able to make magic, magic of dream and deep subconscious and waking isolation thick with impenetrability (Feb. 12, 1934, qtd. in *LNWP* 181).

Later, in the same letter, she indicates how she envisages such poems being presented as discrete, composite wholes: “I should like a poem to be seen as well as read. Colors and textures of certain words *appearing simultaneously* with the sound of words and printed directly above or below each other” (Niedecker, *LNWP* 182, emphasis added). These ideas signal neither a stern, chaste Objectivism, nor some sort of obscurantist Dadaism. Niedecker’s engagements with “magic of dream and deep subconsciousness,” with firstness and the “play of musement,” does not mean that *work* and *world* are being evaded or that concerns about form have been obviated. Reverie, play, and experiences of near-inarticulate “isolation” and “impenetrability” can be turned toward the world of history, placed in relation to one’s “epoch.” Since, in the Peircean view, firstness and not deterministic law (“brute force,” secondness), lie at the deepest generative levels of all natural processes, including of course human ones, a strange and swerving writing like that found in “Next Year” can be perfectly suited, just as Niedecker announced, to “truthfully evoke life in its totalities.”

Thus if a particular poetry evinces play, that does not mean that it is domesticated or childish. The “Next Year” poems are barbed, recalcitrant works. If they “evoke” their troubled and austere epoch—1930s U.S.A—their “barbaric asceticism” is more crucially bound up in a knottiness that refuses to represent *anything* too plainly, easily, or fully. Take this stand-out piece of dream-dialogue:

Don't worry  
 about the comma,  
 darling; nobody  
 ekes out a more  
 facile distend—  
 bathroom  
 luxury. (10)

Here Niedecker starts in the voice of a reassuring lover, but then teasingly addresses the writing itself—"the comma,"—as subject of concern. Then the poem moves abruptly into broad but enigmatic declaration, "nobody..." before closing with the discontinuous phrase "bathroom / luxury," which is somehow eerie, funny, and erotic all at once. "Worry" and "eking" signal Depression struggles, but what is a "facile distend"? Is it the comma, the darling, the bathroom luxury, or something undisclosed here? In place of a visible moment of some kind, the reader gets the energy of paratactically arranged voicings and disparate word-associations. The central clause—"nobody / ekes out a more / facile distend—"—for all its semantic ambiguity, brims with prosodic texture, somehow running through, in a bouncing sprung rhythm, all of the vowels and over half of the consonants in English. It is a phonological token, an incantation that leans toward but never succumbs to true nonsense.

These small poems energetically mark the lower limit-area of language *that cannot quite be summarized*. Summary, of course, involves abstraction, a kind of translation-plus-distillation that is predicated on words and linguistic forms having shared meanings. Summary is always the giving of a plot to what may or not be a state of confusion; thus it is an eminently useful, not to say essential, tool in communication. Poetry, as everyone knows, is language that resists conversions like summary and translation. And small poetry like Niedecker's "Next Year Or I Fly My Rounds, Tempestuous" collection—because its texts *are already* so radically partial and

distilled-looking, and because they have been assembled into unauthorized (that is, *self-*authorized) but salient physical forms—compound this effect.

The trick, the magic, at work is that the poems are confidently built of and around relatively straightforward, legible denotative units; but in their odd disjointed brevity the poems *exceed the semantic sum* of their words.

### “Manipulus”

Summaries, like rules-of-thumb and needle-nosed pliers, are *handy*. Lorine Niedecker, in “Next Year” (and well beyond), manufactures something much stranger, even monstrous: writings that are “handy” precisely because of their transience and frivolity, their *uselessness*.

The hidden *clef* (key) in which Niedecker’s small poems are inscribed can be found in the etymology of the word “manipulate.” This word tends to be applied only in relation to coldly calculated actions of exploitative intent, though sometimes its more neutral usage is seen in reference to, for instance, the complex controls of some machine—such controls must be carefully “manipulated.” As should be evident by now, neither of these usages characterize Niedecker’s poetics, although the latter may be said to skirt its edge.

To *manipulate*—*manus*: “hand”—is handiwork, usually of a forceful or devious kind, conniving toward a selfish end. Lorine Niedecker’s poetry is the opposite of such an activity. In fact, there is a sense in which her poems fly in the face of, and *flout*, willful action itself.

The root of manipulate is not a verb but a noun, “*manipulus*,” which means handful. The manual labor of the “Next Year” poems—the cutting, pasting, and handwriting; the packaging and sending of the fascicle—results in a discrete series of *handfuls*.

She redirects attention from the often manipulative plane of panoramic eyes and discursive mouths to the sphere where linguistic signs are curiously palpable, in but also beyond their state as carefully deployed cursive ink-markings. Notice how the words below draw more attention to their own texture and suggestive music than to the poem-engendering event, the permanently veiled antecedent of “it.” The initial spondaic refrain, the sharp enjambments at the third and fourth line-endings, the rhythmic recurrence of *t* sounds at the ends of words, the exclusive reliance on monosyllabic words, and the presentation of a question that isn’t a question all cooperate to magnify—in the mind and in the ear, whether the poem is voiced or not—the tangibility and interest of the words as a discrete textual construct, a handmade artifact:

All night,  
all night,  
and what is  
it on a post-  
card. (20)

These textual handfuls are not quaint, just as their laconic forms in no way signify diffidence. Niedecker’s small poems recollect the charged held facts tangled within the manipulations, the operations, of linguistic codes and materials. Epistemology finally takes shape through symbols and syntax in the mind, but its strongest engendering force is *contact* with the world’s textured surfaces.

There is a reason we have so many hand-related expressions connected to knowledge and know-how. Something within reach or even invisibly present is *at hand*; something useful is *handy*; information comes first-, second-, or third-*hand*; to speak in regards to something, I may say “touching this matter”; I know a certain pond *like the back of my hand*; distilled and habitual knowledge is *short-hand*; a new relationship or news of some catastrophe is, just like any

delegated task or wielded tool, something I can or cannot *handle*; you hope to demonstrate your adroit *grasp* of the subject matter committed to memory; we *behold* an intensely captivating scene; and here is Emerson's renowned riff on hands as a master trope of experience:

I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition. (from "Experience," *EL* 473).

Niedecker's "Next Year" uses synecdochic reference but more so textual embodiment to evoke these hand-meanings: the page-pieces are handfuls presented to the reader's hands, each "holograph" (literally "hand-written") token, a hand-tied fly-fishing lure, an hors d'oeuvre, a whittled stick.

Hands are agents of work and intimacy; they are used to build, dismantle, cook, signal, and confer affection. The small poems in "Next Year" evoke such agencies and associations. Each manifestation on a given page attests to the hands that crafted it and to the hands of some reader who might hold and attend to it.

One of the identifying traits of an art of barbaric asceticism, as Adorno envisions it, is that it "bears within it a repudiation of false wealth and high-class production" (51). Niedecker's handmade book of handwritten poems implicitly bears such a contention. Its sparseness and coarse constructedness are knowingly at odds with aesthetic and cultural values of the large, full, or sleek. Their smallness isn't cute; it is barbed, challenging.

Of course we ought to remember that "Next Year Or I Fly My Rounds, Tempestuous" is a singular work; it was sent to Louis Zukofsky as a gift, and its texts were not typed or published. Thus it certainly does not represent the only or primary form of Niedecker's poetry, in 1934 or later. The book does, though, synthesize and concentrate several of her

commitments that would prove to be central and career-spanning. Viewed retrospectively, the book shows itself to be an early template for the textual form and verbal mode that would become so prevalent for Niedecker: small sculpted texts, presented one per page, which enact a canny and reverie-affirming vernacular realism. This synthesis of elements also marks “Next Year” as exemplary of small poetry in general, the vital point being that experimental, elliptical language can evince a negative or skeptical posture with respect to culture while simultaneously—indeed *through*—evinced a pragmatic faith in (and exploration of) the actual, operative relations between words, minds, and world.

When a writer plays with or tests the slippages of language, or when her images are austere or cryptic, these cannot automatically be taken as signs of a tragic vision of language, cues to the critic to paint the whole in sentimental or bleak shades. A poetics of barbaric asceticism need not mean a poetics of inveterate negativity or nihilism. At this point, we might return, one final time, to Elizabeth Robinson’s reading of “Next Year” as a tragic study in constraint, ineffectual meanings, and the curses of circular time.

While “Next Year” does include circularity and time as tropes, playing on the multivalent operations of words like “around” and “circle”; and while there is a general sense of accident and cramped space in the piece—what might even be termed a *theme* of constraint, these do not add up to an overriding conceit. The vibrancy of the discrete handwritten speech-acts, continually erupting in new shapes and directions, supersedes any loosely constellated message or meaning that language appears to communicate discursively. There is a sort of asceticism intimated by the work—both its textual form and its words—a spare and fragile quality stemming from an embrace of transient materialities. But it is the *embrace* itself that wins out here: not the embrace of emptiness Robinson claims for the final poem of the series but

Niedecker's "barbaric" tenacity in presenting her swerving playful words as inseparably bound to, *and enhanced by*, their strict, reiterative, rough-hewn textual housing. In other words, The book finally announces not impasse or loss but the irrepressible free movements of language—of voice, we might say—in the merest, coarsest, least expected places and under the leanest and most ephemeral conditions.

**Chapter Three:  
Of Tininess & ‘Weather-Swept’ Spaces:  
A Reading of George Oppen’s *Discrete Series***

I look for the thinnest possible surface.—at times, no doubt, too thin, a hole, a lapse...  
There is no point in defending lapses—but that is, of all risks the one I plan to live with.

*I am much more afraid of a solid mass of words...*  
(Oppen to Corman, *Selected Letters* 40)

series empirical  
series all force  
(Oppen, “Till Other Voices Wake Us”)

*Discrete Series* might be productively considered as a resonant complement to “Next Year,” a more clean-cut, formal example of how a book might convey small-poem barbaric asceticism. Certainly the green, cloth-bound book Oppen and his wife Mary published in 1934 appeared under some impressive American modernist auspices: Ezra Pound wrote a preface for *Discrete Series* and William Carlos Williams reviewed it (“The New Poetic Economy”). Yet the book itself doesn’t leap into dynamic motion, render crystalline images, slide around on esoteric allusive and linguistic planes, or perform any of the other sustained maneuvers one might expect to observe in a representative work of modernism.

Instead, it is “merely” a discrete series of texts, a small book of small poems. Pound himself seemed somewhat perplexed by the work; his preface hardly speaks of the poems, spending most of its short space in preemptive counterarguments against those skeptics who might dismiss Oppen’s poems for their putative “obscurity” or for their specious similarity to Williams’ poems. In lieu of any close readings, Pound just offers a ringing endorsement: “I salute a serious craftsman, who has not got his poems out of any other man’s books...” (*NCP* 4).

George Oppen’s book of poems, though it was years in the making (he began writing the poems in 1928), boasts elegant book-form, and wears a conspicuous stamp of avant-garde

sanction, is still most salient for its rigorously constructed smallness, its recalcitrant yet empirically-derived scraps of language. In all of that, *Discrete Series* echoes not so much Zukofsky, his early mentor and friend, as the Niedecker of “Next Year Or I Fly My Rounds, Tempestuous.” Oppen’s textual strategy of positing untitled groupings of lines on their own pages is very similar to Niedecker’s in form and scale (thirty-one pieces compared to twenty-seven), and he also, like Niedecker, fuses realist commitments and experimental, contentious ones within the same spare texts. On the other hand, Oppen’s way of using language, his method of putting words together in response to experience, is quite different from Niedecker’s. Where “Next Year’s” poems mostly read like weird utterances snagged from or sent out into the 1930s, the poems in *Discrete Series* index that world (the work was originally subtitled “The 1930s”) in the torqued, stacked nouns and prepositions of a mind intent on bringing experience’s urgent materiality—its hard resistances and definite differentiations—into language itself, into poetic form.<sup>79</sup>

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Since poetic smallness as such, even if remarked, is so rarely engaged at length, we might auspiciously move into a discussion of *Discrete Series* by considering two curious Oppen-related occurrences of the word “tiny.” In her essay “A Little Too Little,” Jenny Penberthy cites George and Mary Oppen’s respective reminiscences of Lorine Niedecker’s visit to New York in 1933, as well as their thumbnailed sense of her whole life and career as a poet. The brief sketches were articulated much later, in the mid-’60s, and their subject—Niedecker—is thus found shrouded in gauzy, caricaturing terms:

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<sup>79</sup> This is essentially the aim of Objectivism, as spelled out by Zukofsky, but Oppen’s way of taking on these ambitions poetically stands alone in its radical austerity.

[Mary]: New York was overwhelming, and she was alone, a *tiny*, timid, *small*-town girl...she chose a way of hard physical work, and her poetry emerged from a *tiny* life...[George]: ...a *tiny little* person, very, very near sighted always. She had graduated from Wisconsin but was *too timid* to face almost any job....Someone in Scotland printed a *tiny little* book of her poems, which are *little barely audible* poems, not without loveliness (emphasis added, qtd. in Penberthy 5)

Notice the repeated, epithetical use of “timid” and the conspicuously redundant construction “tiny little” that George Oppen uses for both person and book. Penberthy calls these impressionistic portraits “so inaccurate that they’re comical” (5), and indeed even someone who could not verify or deny the facts of the matter would recognize how the Oppens’ characterization condescends to and contains Niedecker as a sort of charming, grotesque curiosity.

Penberthy goes on to explain why the Oppens would have had such a neatly packaged, limited view of Niedecker—her only two books published, thus widely known, by then were *New Goose* (1946) and *My Friend Tree* (1961) both small books containing only small poems. But instead of following the tack of Penberthy’s essay, which counters the Oppens’ view by pointing to Niedecker’s increasingly long sequential poems of the ’60s (an important corrective, for sure), we might rethink and reclaim the notion of smallness that is invoked in the sketches, stripping it of its default air of pity and derogation and illuminating the strengths and values unique to “tininess.”

The great irony in this particular case is that at the very time of Niedecker’s visit, George Oppen was diligently piecing together his own tiny poems! Eliot Weinberger, in his Preface to Oppen’s *Collected Poems*, even uses that very word to emphasize how patently *small* Oppen’s first

book was: “He...published a tiny book of enigmatic poems in 1934, then...joined the Communist Party and stopped writing” (xiii). Notice how the descriptor is applied to the thirty-six page *book*; the poems, all of which are small and many of which are truly tiny, are allowed to be “enigmatic.” My contention is that it is precisely the smallness, of both texts and book, which *creates* the particular sort of enigma that is felt here.

To see how these descriptors are mutually implicated, we might transpose the key words in question and state an equally convincing version of the case: that Oppen “published an *enigmatic book of tiny poems*.”

Two vital things are revealed in this little pile-up around “tininess”—first, that people tend to notice conspicuous smallness, whether of book, place, poem, or person; and second, that to *notice* exceptional and/or deliberate smallness is to be intrigued, is to find *in* that smallness something mysterious, even obscure. Weinberger justly calls Oppen’s tiny poems of 1934 “enigmatic,” and how better to characterize the Oppens’ redundant, hyperbolic description of Niedecker’s life and work than as finding all that tininess rather *baffling*; they were facing and trying to speak to something of an enigma, just as Weinberger does and indeed just as we are now, as we look at both poets’ forms of smallness.

One more vital thing revealed here is the potential for small poems to be embodied *as a small book*. However conventional a given publication is and whether its pages bear typed or handwritten lines, if the book consists entirely of spare, page-enveloped texts, the composite whole acquires the distinct air of a spare, small thing. If the given book furthermore contains a relatively short number of pages and is embodied within smaller-than-usual book dimensions—as is the case with *Discrete Series*, “Next Year,” and the “tiny little book” of Niedecker’s poems the Oppens mention (*My Friend Tree*, printed by Ian Hamilton Finlay’s Wild Hawthorn Press in

1961)—then the air of collective smallness conveyed by the constituent poems is corroborated by an actual, physical smallness, thus magnifying the overall effect.<sup>80</sup> Thus, in several interrelated senses, Weinberger is quite right to deem *Discrete Series* a “tiny book.”

### *Discrete Series*

The best way to enter Oppen’s curiously tiny book of tiny poems is not through Pound’s preface, Williams’ review, or even backwards in light of Oppen’s most celebrated book, *Of Being Numerous* (1968).<sup>81</sup> We should enter simply through the portal of the book’s first poem, after a quick glance at the book’s curious title. One might take *Discrete Series*, as Williams hypothesizes in his review, to mean “a series separate from other series” (*GOMP* 268), a reasonable assumption and one that aptly draws attention to the blurring and combining of the singular and the plural in the same word-form: *series*. Oppen himself, though, explains in a 1969 interview that his title is a technical term, a type of grouped data that is an opposed counterpart to a “pure mathematical series” where “each term is derived from the preceding term by a rule.”

Conversely, a discrete series is

a series of terms each of which is empirically derived, each of which is empirically true. And this is the reason for the fragmentary character of those poems. I was

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<sup>80</sup> See Chapter One, where I discuss this poem-book relation in terms of things that can be carried around in a pocket. A book or a single small poem could become a significant pocketed object—both are portable—but a pocket-sized book of small poems presents a unique case, a potent embedding of discrete, framed, portable tokens within a portable token-like object: “My heart is in my pocket, it is poems by Pierre Reverdy” (O’Hara 17).

<sup>81</sup> From the present vantage point, it is tempting, when discussing parts and wholes and scale in connection to Oppen, to think of his lauded, Pulitzer Prize-winning book, which addresses these ideas explicitly and in sustained ways. *Of Being Numerous* casts its shadow over Oppen’s first book, but it should not overshadow or be seen as abrogating the much earlier work. Oppen does, in interviews, identify the *Discrete Series* poem “Party on Shipboard” as containing the germ of his latter book (“Dembo: You said that the whole *Of Being Numerous* was contained in that poem. Oppen: Yes, that was my first attempt” [*GOMP* 201]), but the very way this relation is figured should alert us to the fact that the first book, as a work entire, is a discrepant work warranting at least some separate attention.

attempting to construct a meaning by empirical statements, by imagist statements.

(CL 161)

Note the unqualified, candid invocation of the “empirically true” and the possibility of “constructing meaning.” Oppen’s poems are indeed possessed of a “fragmentary character,” within themselves respectively and also relative to each other (in keeping with the title’s part/whole tension). This seeming paradox in *Discrete Series*—poems becoming disjointed, “enigmatic,” or “obscure” (to again cite Weinberger and Pound) *because* the poet so tenaciously draws from and believes in the empirically true—is a crystallized, exemplary instance of what underlies all small poems in some degree, the charged tension that makes them “significant little wrecks.”

Oppen may have *sought* clarity in his poetry, but he never presumed to have really laid claim to it. The seeking, the testing of truth through language was Oppen’s declared vocation, and the materials of page and type and book were the means for such testing. In the 1930s Oppen strove for the finite, the particular, and the definite amongst the multifarious and infinite. Language, in its abstract and general nouns, skews the mind towards the latter conceptions, thus perpetuating a separation from the “empirically true”; but it also allows specific objects or parts or events to be named, and, most significantly, it allows a person to chart the processes themselves by which her mind endeavors to face, grasp, and name such things. In particular, Oppen found that a small book of small discrete texts might be a vital interpolation in this conundrum. Thus *Discrete Series* still stands as Oppen’s most rigorous and concentrated attempt to bring language and the material but “weather-swept” and “impenetrable”<sup>82</sup> world reciprocally to bear on each other.

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<sup>82</sup> This word became a crucial one for Oppen in its characterization of our perplexing and exhausting relation to the material world. We perceive it readily and continuously through our senses, but this contact is not knowledge.

*Discrete Series* begins with this poem:

The knowledge not of sorrow, you were  
     saying, but of boredom  
 Is—aside from reading speaking  
     smoking—  
 Of what, Maude Blessingbourne it was,  
     wished to know when, having risen,  
 “approached the window as if to see  
     what really was going on”;  
 And saw rain falling in the distance  
     more slowly,  
 The road clear from her past the window-  
     glass—  
 Of the world, weather-swept, with which  
     one shares the century. (*NCP* 5)

As many critics have noted, this first piece of *Discrete Series* is really a kind of proem or epigraph-in-verse, the announcement of a dramatic chorus figure. It announces some of the book’s central themes—boredom, insides versus outsides, desire for knowledge, a world that seems beleaguered, “weather-swept”—in a single Henry James-like sentence of origami-folded clauses and phrases. Of course, since the named personage and the citation are directly taken from James’ “The Story in It,” Oppen’s piece is clearly a deliberate evocation of that master of modern fiction. Unlike the poems that follow, this one combines a stately, continuous (though syncopated) voice with a highly regularized structure of alternating lines—longer ones interlaced with shorter, indented ones. At fourteen lines, and given its momentous final couplet, the whole thing is a sort of half-found, half-improvised modernist sonnet.

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The surfaces are there, with and around us, and our hands touch them, but we cannot “penetrate” or fathom them, even though this is precisely what we long to do. Oppen’s sense of the world’s impenetrability is less a skeptic’s judgment of the world than it is an existentialist’s sympathetic affirmation of the perpetual human yearning for understanding, for meaning.

The poem is a small parable that sets the stage and the tone, strikes the keynotes, for the discrete pieces that furnish the rest of the book's pages. Transfigured boredom,<sup>83</sup> "wishing to know" something, and the natural and technological presence of the world—"rain" and "roads"—beckoning from the other side of some "window-glass" are the thoughts that animate all the poems in *Discrete Series*. The central couplet, the quotation, succinctly characterizes both Oppen's own attentions that resulted in the poems in *Discrete Series* as well as the sort of readerly attention those poems induce: " 'approached the window as if to see / what really was going on'."

This spliced-in phrase from James is not merely an image to flesh out the poem or even a metaphor for how we do or might incline towards reality. There are many actual windows and enclosures of various kinds denoted in the book, for one thing, but purposive looking ("wishing to know," "rising" and "approaching" something) is actually determined, in any particular instance, by the window of the perceptual frame and of the brain's activity at that moment. *Discrete Series* as a whole, and every separate poem, implies a poet trying to engage and then graph these window-framed instances of what seems to be "really...going on" in the "weather-swept world" of certain experienced moments. Significantly, Maude Blessingbourne's desire for knowledge is deflected—she approached "as if to see"—just as the "what" in question, something "going on" out there, begs for the qualification "really." Both James' original phrasing and Oppen's citation are acknowledgments that approaches to seeing—even deliberate, attentive seeing—are necessarily caught up in distortion, limitation, and dense complexity, though these, separately or together, do not spell the negation of reality as an illusion.

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<sup>83</sup> For an incisive explication of the Oppen's concept of boredom, see the first several pages of Lyn Hejinian's essay "Preliminary to a Close Reading of *Discrete Series*," in *Thinking Poetics: Essays On George Oppen*, edited by Steve Shoemaker.

Oppen reproduces this effect—of the observer-writer attempting to notate the reality intimated on and underneath the surface of some purview—for readers of his small, single-page poems. We turn a page as if opening our eyes to something new or turning a corner, and, if we “wish to know,” we approach the page-window, study its configuration of signs “as if to see / what really [is] going on” there.

The poems that follow the first one mostly lack such a voluble and delineated subject-presence—by which I mean both the poem’s speaker as well as the named character in the middle of the cinematic frame. Any speaker or self in the remaining poems is at most implicit. It would be more apt to say that the concrete written structures themselves become subject-like, creaturely forms that bear signs of a habitat, an ecology. Every one of the thirty-one poems in the book has a distinctive visual, “phanopoetic” imprint, its own crafted shape on the page. Furthermore, the thirty poems that follow the one above are markedly smaller, less continuous in their syntax, and less evenly arranged as stacks of lines than the first poem. (This is one of the key reasons the reader comes to account for the first piece as a proem or epigraph: the other poems, as varied as they are, are of a piece with each other and discrepant from the poem that presents itself as the first of their company.)

As one flips through and around the book’s pages, then, there is a sort of menagerie effect, each text a slight or more disparate permutation of the others. I have alleged this same effect for much of Niedecker’s small poetry, and indeed we might say that *Discrete Series’s* iteration of page-forms is analogous (though not congruent) to “Next Year’s.” Each of Oppen’s distinctive texts, stabilized by its typescript lettering and enveloped by blank space, gives a more sculpted and constructed impression than is possible in Niedecker’s sinuous handwritten texts. Indeed, the clean, precise textual manifestation of Oppen’s polymorphous

array of texts complements their fragmentary and spare structures of language; they end up resembling, from one view, lost pieces from some building or machine, objects that seem as worn and “weather-swept” as they do constructed. (I will give more attention below to this paradoxical poetics of suggesting damage as well as constructedness and salvage, drawing from Peirce’s notions of secondness in experience and in language.)

‘     ‘     ‘

When the epigraph page is turned and the series proper is entered, the reader faces a pair of gaunt, stretched poems, to the left and right of the binding’s gutter. Their respective beginnings look like this:

White. From the Under arm of T  The red globe. Up Down. Round  <div style="text-align: right;">(6)</div>	and	Thus Hides the  Parts—the prudery Of Frigidaire, of Soda-jerking—  <div style="text-align: right;">(7)</div>
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A few pages later, this denser and longer-lined form appears:

From this distance thinking toward you  
 Time is recession

Movement of no import  
 Not encountering you

Save the pulse cumulates a past  
 And you pulse separate doubly. (24)

And further on, two compact facing quatrains reflect each other's structure even as each refracts the other's scene or event:

The edge of the ocean,  
 The shore: here  
 Somebody's lawn,  
 By the water. (18)

Tug against the river—  
 Motor turning, lights  
 In the fast water off the bow-wave:  
 Passes slowly. (19)

Clearly these poems do not foreground the “magic of dream and deep subconscious,” the firstness animating Niedecker’s “Next Year” poems. Oppen’s poems materialize according to different pressures of language.

Let us look closely at two poems. First, here is one of a half-dozen poems in *Discrete Series* that concerns a *car*, one of many concerning a *vehicle* (including boats, now) and one of many more that make some reference to *containers*, concrete circumscribed spaces. Instead of depicting some car or building a continuous rhetoric *about* cars, Oppen’s spare poem charts, in discontinuous phrases, the experience of feeling the car’s strange impingement on, its reconfiguration of, time and space. The poet contemplates this moving, enveloping thing, and he shapes a textual thing that communicates an analogous set of effects:

The evening, water in a glass  
 Thru which our car runs on a higher road

Over what has the air frozen?

Nothing can equal in polish and obscured  
 origin that dark instrument

A car

(Which.

Ease; the hand on the sword-hilt (8)

The poem begins on a calm, familiar plane. There is a temporal setting and there is an object. The first line simply names these things in bare language, placing them in paratactic apposition with a comma. Lacking as it does any definite perceiving subject and any verbs or modifiers, the first line resembles the bracketed blocking indications in a play script or, at another pole, a haiku. The relationship between the two elements is felt as both actual and potentially metaphorical; the glass of water is visualized as a thing *within* the evening time, even as the comma insinuates that evening *is* or *is like* water in a glass.

The one tiny oddness in this quiet scene, a quirk that alerts us to the kind of distortion that will be found in the rest of the poem, is the article “The” which begins the poem. “*An evening*” would be more recognizable, or “this evening,” or “evening time,” or simply “evening.” Using the definite article without specifying any particular context (such as “The evening we went for a drive”) makes the term loom, hermetically, as if it is invoking some single cosmic epoch—*the evening* of the world, evening itself.<sup>84</sup>

After that first line, the scene, stable in spite of its “The,” begins to tilt and blur and lurch. “Thru which our car runs” introduces, all at once, a prepositional phrase, pronouns, implicit persons, and a verb, but the clause has only an elliptical relation to the first line.

What is the *which* here? Does the car run “thru” the glass—the nearest but least plausible antecedent—the water in the glass, or the evening itself (whether or not we see the evening transfigured through a volume-of-water metaphor)? The “higher road” on which the car is said to run only adds to such ambiguity, even as it introduces another adjective and referential noun into the poem’s sparse tableau. Is the road higher than some implied “road” where evening,

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<sup>84</sup> For another poetic confrontation with the indeterminacy and weight of dusk, see Wallace Stevens’ poem “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” whose final stanza begins with the gnomic “It was evening all afternoon” (76).

water, and glass exist, or just higher than other roads nearby? Or is the poem invoking the “high road” idiom, as a perhaps ironic comment on the assumed “rightness” (righteousness) of modern technology?

These questions are not meant to be answered in the way a riddle might be solved; they merely gather around the spare text as alluring ambiguities. Oppen’s *Discrete Series* poems, almost every one of them, name objects, persons, and perhaps a scene, but they persistently refuse to *describe* these things in fleshed-out, fluent language. Instead, they are constructed primarily around the *bolts and hinges* of grammatical language, that is, respectively, bare nouns and pronouns and then the prepositions, articles, and infrequent adjectives that indicate, orient, relate, and inflect those named things. *In, a, the, over, and, with, on, which*—these are the charged and recurring words that structure the poems. There is a palpable paucity of verbs in *Discrete Series*. Force and action are implicit, but the poems present *stilled* scenes. The central effect of this stilling, and perhaps the reason for it, is to foreground the operations of language themselves as the forces most worthy of our attention. This foregrounding—more overt in this case—is just what we see occurring in the third line of the poem at hand.

Here, Oppen formalizes his concerns with the operation of language by suddenly posing an unanswerable question to no one: “*Over what* has the air frozen?” It is as if the poem starts over at this point, the new sentence suspended in its own pocket of empty space and seeming to come from a new speaker. In structure, the clause echoes the line before it (“Thru which...”) but foregrounds more forcefully grammar’s strained correlation to the experienced world: what is the “what” and is the air truly “over” it? Oppen, as the half-disoriented perceiver of the thing/situation, comes to the surface, querying. The question’s reference, frozen air, is discontinuous with the prior references, but at least brings another element into the poem.



parenthesis mark and a period. The word “Ease” starts the final line with a similar sort of physical interruption, and though it is no clearer than “(Which.” in its function, as both a verb and a noun it *moves* the poem in an empiricist direction. Oppen concludes his poem with a recognizable modernist technique, the hard cut to some hard detail. Although the poem has swirled from “our car” to “A car,” we end on a close-up of definite parts, one of them an apparent metaphor: “*the* hand on *the* sword-hilt.” The latter seems to be a manual gear-shift (thus “Ease” suggests a slow release of the clutch, a sliding into motion), and its weapon image works as an objective correlative for the phrase “that dark instrument,” which hovers just above it on the page. In spite of the implicit metaphor in the last phrase, this ending doesn’t clarify or offer an aesthetical resolution. It is a group of monosyllabic morphemes, punctuation marks, and a pair of metonymic details, cobbled together with a deliberate coarseness; there isn’t even a period to declare the poem ended. Oppen, in the poem, moves from a hazily evoked scene to a grammar-featuring question and an oracular pronouncement to, finally, a small tangle of words and details. Such is his approach to an automobile, his effort to see and show, in writing, “what really was going on” there.

The second poem I want to consider instructively complements the first. It is also one of *Discrete Series*’ more sparsely arranged poems, and it too considers a human enclosure, but its shifts and tensions are more subtle than those in the poem above. Halfway through *Discrete Series*, the reader finds this text, which appears and unfolds somewhat like a thirty-second experimental film-portrait<sup>85</sup> of a landscape.

This land:

The hills, round under straw;

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<sup>85</sup> For a discussion of the cinematic character of Oppen’s poems, see Lyn Hejinian’s “Preliminary to a Close Reading of *Discrete Series*.” See also, on the same correspondence in Niedecker, Elizabeth Willis’s essay “The Milk Separator and the New Goose: Niedecker, Eisenstein, and the Poetics of Non-indifference.”

A house

With rigid trees

And flaunts

A family laundry,

And the glass of windows (16)

The language gestures demonstratively: “*This* land,” a camera lens opening on some obfuscated geography. The next line is a cut or a zoom-in—particular things are indicated, things with shape and relation (one covering the others). Characteristically, Oppen withholds any verbs and any embellishments. “A house” works as another jump cut, a montage or a tracking shot that reveals, at last, something pertaining directly to human living and making. Yet it is only *a* house, an anonymous one among many (like “A car” in the poem above). On the page, these first three lines form an elegant haiku—mostly monosyllables, no enjambment, rich consonance (“*This...the*,” “*land...hills...house*,” “*round under straw*”)—but the lyric moment proves only a point of departure beyond which words lose, tangle, or fray the thread that seems to have been put in place.

The stanza break after line three implies a new film “shot,” that is, in language, a new grammatical start of phrase, yet the capitalized prepositional phrase “With rigid trees” appears to be a weird follow-up on either the closest noun or all the nouns that precede it. The line does furnish a more visual sense of landscape, but “rigid trees” is a vaguely ominous image. Thus the line, textually, syntactically, and semantically, is a *small rupture* in the poem (though not the kind of articulate, assertive one considered in the poem above).

The final three lines, at first glance, seem to mirror the first three, seem to offer a second, bookending haiku. Such is almost the case, though this closing scene or shot is far too haunted,

stilted, and cryptic to be justly compared to the first stanza. Again, here, the poem lurches into motion after a jarring break: “And flaunts / A family laundry.” *What* flaunts? The trees or the house or something else? “*That* flaunts” would fluidly and coherently attribute the action to a subject, the house (since the verb form “flaunts” does not match the plural “trees”). Also, the word “flaunts” is itself completely discordant and thrilling as the poem’s only verb; it plainly flaunts itself. As the line stands, then, it does not follow anything that precedes it: with respect to syntax, part of speech, subject-verb agreement, and diction, it *breaks into* the poem, causing a sort of mild vertigo. The reader looks back a few lines, rereading, in search of some missed connection along the way. Since that isn’t to be found, “flaunt” pushes the mind and breath through the remaining two lines, a close-up montage:

And flaunts  
 A family laundry,  
 And the glass of windows

These last lines gather a sort of loose metrics, something between iambic and trochaic, the stresses falling on the each of the nouns in the small cascade. This rhythm, together with the recurring *l* and *nd/nt* sounds, organizes the three-line montage in the mind, even though no story or clear scene is revealed. Neither “family laundry” nor “the glass of windows” are things people would be likely to flaunt, but a scene might seem to do as much. Oppen has his eye on details but his mind on words, how they work to present those details. As in the poem above, the poem ends abruptly, without a period, with fragments of human paraphernalia but no humans. We have zoomed or jumped from “This land” to “A house,” but finally we can only



forms material for the exercise of my will....The idea of second must be reckoned as an easy one to comprehend. That of first is so tender that you cannot touch it without spoiling it; but that of second is *eminently hard and tangible*. It is very familiar, too; it is *forced upon us daily*; it is the main lesson of life. In youth, the world is fresh and we seem free; but *limitation, conflict, constraint*, and secondness generally, make up the teaching of experience. (“A Guess at the Riddle,” *EP* 1.249, emphasis added)

Elsewhere, in a critique of Hegel, Peirce succinctly designates secondness as “brute actuality.” He contends that the prime flaw in Hegel’s philosophy is that he has “usually overlooked external secondness, altogether. In other words, he has committed the trifling oversight of forgetting that there is a real world with real actions and reactions. Rather a serious oversight that” (256). The half-ironic tone and the roundness of the charge should not overshadow Peirce’s quite serious (and thoroughgoing) view that reality, a sense of the “real world” as such, is intrinsically conveyed by the experience of secondness. You or I, as individual subjects, may interpret, imagine, and believe the world to be any number of things, but each of us must live out these notions, testing them, as they continually collide with (“knock against”) the recalcitrant “outward clash” of matter, natural forces, and inexorable events. Reality is that which perpetually beckons and rebuffs and modifies us. We know it as anti-ego, the *non-me*. True empiricists know the real world exists not because they presume to have fathomed and explained its supposed mysteries—such pseudo-empiricists are actually positivists or rationalists—but because they are repeatedly thwarted and bewildered and surprised by the material world.

The pertinence of such a conception to Oppen's thinking and writing throughout his life, but especially to *Discrete Series*, is striking. In the last poem Oppen published during his lifetime, "Till Other Voices Wake US," he reflects on his first composition:

I named the book  
*series empirical*  
*series all force*  
 in *events* the myriad  
  
 lights *have entered*  
 us (NCP 286, emphasis added)

*Discrete Series*' acute sense of empiricism, its concern with force, and the sense that those features of the work correspond directly to urgent environing events, events that *enter us*, willy-nilly, make it an epitome of "a sense of secondness." In its *hardness* secondness is both threateningly violent and reliably immediate. Peirce says that our experience compels us "to admit that there is such an element in the world of experience as *brute force*" (CP 2.84-89); he poetically calls this force "the Outward Clash" (CP 8.41). But secondness is also the category of actuality, of the "haecceity" or *thisness* of facts ("haecceity is the *ultima ratio*, the brutal fact that will not be questioned"); thus, as quantity, it is characterized precisely by discrete things in their serial and contingent arrangements (EP 1.275; EP 1.234). *Discrete Series* is a book of secondness to an uncanny degree.

A question arises here, though: can poems, since they consist of language, actually embody secondness? As with the similar question above regarding Niedecker and firstness, the strict answer is "no." Words are symbolic signs that operate in relation to systems and codes and associations; as such, they cannot ever fully *embody* either pure firstness or pure secondness, both of which, as categories, are the predicate realities that prompt us and that we bring into

relation through thought and language. There are, however, elements of secondness within Peirce's semiotics that *correspond* to and can *indicate* the experience of secondness in the world itself.

The word "index," which has lately become somewhat tainted with jargon-like overuse, is a key term of secondness in Peirce's semiotic. Even in this respect, it is often misused, as Peirce's "index" only applies to signs that relate to their object through a real relation, thus excluding all words, which are "symbols" ("icon," "index," and "symbol" are the three ways signs might relate to their objects, by resemblance, actual connection, or convention, respectively). An actual hand pointing north is an "indexical" sign; the word "look!" or "north" is not. Words do, though, evoke interpretant-signs that can operate in an indicative, "second" capacity. Peirce calls these "dicent signs," each of which is defined as "a sign represented in its signified interpretant *as if* it were in a Real Relation to its Object" (A Letter to Lady Welby," 33-34, emphasis added). That is, words—individually or as the shaped composite of a poem—can be used in a way that conveys (to the interpreter's mind) an *intention* to index the world, a sense that the given signs have a sincere and urgent connection to facts as such. It is not that a dicent sign *has* a real relation to its object—the "as if" in the quote above is all-important—but rather that it "necessarily *represents itself to be* a genuine Index" (EP 2.275-276).<sup>87</sup>

The poems in *Discrete Series*—"series empirical / series all force"—chart or index (note that the verb form can still apply here) 1930s reality in their pared-down, "dicent"-tending nouns, prepositions, articles and phrases and also in their formal manifestation as discrete, shaped, worn, obdurate *things*, facts.

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<sup>87</sup> Here is yet one more case where Peirce's triadic semiotics, specifically his notion of the interpretant, allows for more refined study of how poetic language works. In his reading of Oppen, for instance, Joseph Conte constrains himself to Saussure's semiotics, and thus finds himself disposed to explain Oppen's view of language as "anti-realist" (121-41).

In spite of the connections between poet and philosopher here, I know of only one critic who has noted it. On the last page of her essay on *Discrete Series* (an essay, published in 2009, in which she explicitly engages the “indexicality” of the poems), poet Lyn Hejinian invokes Peirce in the following paragraph to characterize Oppen’s confrontation of time’s reality, its brute secondness:

Time, then, is the principle continuum through which Oppen’s *Discrete Series* pass, “the continuum par excellence,” as Charles Sanders Peirce once noted, “through the spectacles of which we encounter every other continuum.” This continuum is inherently paradoxical in character, however; though it “consists in a binding together of things that are different and remain different, so that they are in a measure dependent on one another,” it assures that at the same time they remain “in a measure independent,” because “time has a point of discontinuity at the present.” The indexically at hand, present, palpable instant—this one—in being immediately available to sensuous experience, “differs from all other instants absolutely,” while all others, either flowing together into what we know of the past or into what we expect of the future, “only differ in degree” (Peirce 65-66).

Oppen set us this paradox in the very title of his poem, *Discrete Series*. (59)

Even though secondness is not explicitly mentioned, this is clearly the category being discussed, the element Hejinian sees pertaining to Oppen. It is a relatively bounded and uncontextualized adducing of Peirce, but nonetheless a thrillingly corroborating one. Of course there is no mention of empirical, objective experience in the above passage, as Hejinian is drawing from one of Peirce’s lectures on cosmology. Because he is discussing time and secondness in their deepest and most abstract aspect, the connection to allegedly realist books of small-scale

experimental poetry is necessarily tenuous. Here is another passage from Peirce that addresses the notion of “the instant” but in terms more concrete, terms that better illustrate the secondness of *Discrete Series*’ poems, their marking of time:

*The sense of hitting and of getting hit are nearly the same, and should be classed together. The common element is the sense of an actual occurrence, of actual action and reaction. There is an intense reality about this kind of experience, a sharp sundering of subject and object. While I am seated calmly in the dark, the lights are suddenly turned on, and at that instant I am conscious, not of a process of change, but yet of something more than can be contained in an instant. I have a sense of a saltus, of there being two sides to that instant. (EP 1.260)*

Each text-form in the book and the book entire convey the sense of both “hitting and getting hit”; each constructed “image/instant” (Hejinian 60) attests to an experienced reality by pointing to it verbally, thrusting into it a new object (hitting), and also by formally evincing reality’s “weather-sweeping” damages (getting hit).

Peirce himself inadvertently provides an apt figuration of such poems in his essay “A Guess at the Riddle.” Quoting *The Merchant of Venice* to help his readers picture secondness, Peirce notes, poignantly,

With what firstness: “The scarfed bark puts from her native bay”; with what secondness “doth she return, /With overweathered ribs and ragged sails.” (EP 1.249)

Oppen’s poems in *Discrete Series* have been deliberately fashioned into and presented as so many “overweathered” vessels, their tininess and patent marks of piecemeal composition attesting to an overwhelming world and a rigorous (ascetic) testing of words’ operations.

### “Redoubtable”

As the discussion above shows, many of the poems in *Discrete Series* involve enclosures—buildings, cars, apartments, restaurants; correspondingly, the poems themselves are room-like enclosures. The room Peirce imagines sitting in, experiencing the sharp secondness of “lights...suddenly turned on,” metonymically corresponds to the single-page text in which one can experience, through language and form, a discrete “sense of an actual occurrence, of actual action and reaction...an intense reality.”

In his essay on *Discrete Series*, critic Joseph Conte immediately points to the book’s strict poem-per-page modus operandi, which Oppen as publisher (along with his wife Mary) had quite deliberately arranged. To their dismay, this extra surrounding space accorded each poem was in effect deemed prohibitively wasteful when the 1975 *Collected Poems of George Oppen* was prepared. There, the thirty-one poems of *Discrete Series* are crowded onto a dozen pages, with little space even separating them.<sup>88</sup> In order to emphasize and theorize the effect of the discretely housed texts, Conte recruits linguist and poet Jack Spicer from the future. Spicer conceived of page and book in terms of a “house-room” analogy:

Spicer’s analogue for the finite series is the haunted house. The house is a closed structure within which there are several contiguous rooms. The haunted house that one enters is the book, each room is an individual poem, and the furnishings that Spicer’s spooks move about are the words of the poem: “It’s as if you go into a room, a dark room, the light is turned on for a minute, then it’s turned off again, and then you go into a different room where a light is turned on and

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<sup>88</sup> Mary Oppen’s wry comment on the situation strikes right to the heart of the issue: “Well, Jay Laughlin just got a little bit too Scotch and wouldn’t give a whole page to each poem and the way they’ve been reprinted makes some people think that if there are three little bits on a page, that’s one poem, whereas that wasn’t the way the *Discrete Series* was printed” (qtd. in Conte 122).

turned off” (*NAP* 233). Partitioning, “the take from one room to another, from one frame to another,” and the compositional time limits of one sitting, preclude in the Spicerian series the “great ideas” or developmental superstructure that governs the epic. (108)

Conte aptly applies this correspondence to Oppen’s book, noting that each of *Discrete Series*’ poems, “each room,” “has its functional place in the house as a whole, yet the poet discretely douses the light from each room before proceeding” (123).

‘ ‘ ‘

It is widely remarked that “stanza” literally means “room,” but the significance of this figure is rarely, indeed almost never, considered at any length. It is even more unusual to encounter a vision of the page, or better, the page-poem complex, as a room-like thing. Conte is dead-on invoking this analogy for *Discrete Series*, and his analysis that takes off from this starting block is thorough and eloquent. Nonetheless, Conte deals with the room/page connection rather quickly, leaving considerable space for a deeper conception of the figure, which is not merely a metaphorical trope or abstract symbol. Rather, when the small poem lodged in or floating conspicuously on its rectilinear page is considered as a room, this is a metonymic figuration.<sup>89</sup> A page, though it is two-dimensional, is literally a room-shaped space that is actually furnished, by the hands, with words or other markings. The physics involved are congruent, not merely poetically analogous (as in, for instance, a figure like “the chamber-pot of the page”). Furthermore, the objects pertaining to reading—loose paper, chairs, books, writing instruments—as well as the practice of reading itself are *contiguous* to rooms (just as hands are contiguous to both rooms and to reading); all of these parts and material elements are implicated

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<sup>89</sup> Though Joseph Conte, in *Unending Design*, does present a singularly intelligent discussion of Oppen’s (and many other poets’) metonymic language, he does not engage the question of metonymy’s role in the poem-as-room analogy.

together in space and in *use*. They are, through experience, entangled in each other's network of associations and significances. Thus the small-poem-as-room analogy, especially in its bearing on *Discrete Series*, warrants more thorough examination.

A room, as such, is a radical kind of enclosure: usually geometrically rigid (its boundaries dominated by right angles and planar surfaces), lit artificially or with some combination of natural and artificial light, and furnished and arrayed with manufactured objects and colors. These latter elements figure the larger problem of such spaces, which is to suggest, appropriate, and “bring inside” the forms and beauties of Nature, but to do so through means that are patently constructed and artificial (cleaner lines, planes, synthetic materials, ornate embellishments).

Given all this, it is no surprise that rooms can be intimately familiar, inexplicably weird, or both at the same time.

Rooms, as such, are peculiar to human creatures. In *Poetics of Space*, Bachelard offers warm, wise meditations on the phenomenology of nests and shells and caves; these images of creaturely habitation, these facts and their evocative correlation to our living spaces, are salutary, but the room cannot be too hastily dissolved into or forfeited to these natural enclosures. Human spaces of shelter and habitation are designed as retreats from raw nature, structures built around the logic that human beings are creatures with peculiar needs and who thus require their own discrepant spaces. Rooms are profoundly *unnatural*.

‘ ‘ ‘

The cardinal question here, the question Oppen's *Discrete Series* raises and—in a certain sense, through its form—answers, is that of poetry's relation to experienced space, not only the space a poem might refer to “out there” but the space, or sense of space, the poem itself creates.

With great verve and probity, Angus Fletcher, in *A New Theory for American Poetry*, attends to this question, arguing for the significance of the ignored or maligned “descriptive tradition” and its quintessential form: the phrastic, metonymic “*environment-poem*” (9). This terminology is potentially misleading. Fletcher is not referring to “nature poems” that carefully attempt to render a *topos* in words. In fact, he is concerned with something more literally natural, more fundamental to the problems of where a poet finds herself and what a poem is. True poetic description, for Fletcher, involves an almost too-close attention to the encompassing *milieu* in which one moves, with the horizon serving as the master metonymic trope or myth: “To describe is to see whatever disarray surrounds the sensating and even sensual walker, since the receding horizon alone controls the quest” (Fletcher 27). This kind of description is paradoxically “without place” (12), and thus in effect it is anti-topographical; instead of rendering a location through logically arranged details, such poems conjure an environment of their own—they figure, in analogue, the poet’s experience of being environed—through a crowded, often disorganized set of referents that nonetheless *cohere*.<sup>90</sup> Against the logos-favoring tether of *topos*, Fletcher poses the phenomenological coherence of *chora*. Thus place-less descriptive poems are “able to express the life of an enviroing space, a self-organizing chorography” (12).

As one of the above citations indicates, Fletcher focuses on the image of the walking poet as his exemplar, and indeed walking coincides well with the long-form descriptive poems, like those in Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, which Fletcher justly posits as the seminal model of such a mode. However, his first and primary poet of concern is John Clare, whose descriptive “environment- poems” were often knotty, single-page lyrics. These poems are “chorographic”

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<sup>90</sup> This word, Fletcher’s, is rooted in a scientific understanding of systems. See especially Chapters 11 and 13 of *A New Theory for American Poetry*, where Fletcher gives a full consideration of how recent theories might bear on or undergird descriptive or “chorographic” poetics.

in a different way than long-form, proliferative poems, as pointed to by what Fletcher calls John Clare's conundrum: "what can be the enclosing space that does not enclose?" (20). Certainly the horizon creates an effect of ultimate un-enclosing enclosure as it simultaneously marks a boundary and promises to open outward onto new worlds; but Clare's lyrics—as well as those of that ready counterpart to Whitman, Emily Dickinson, and the small poems of George Oppen—figure a different dialectics: that of the enclosed space of dwelling or visit, specifically *the room*.

Long, voluble poems transport and carry one along—as they spill over from page to page, flouting the would-be housings—but small poems invite distinct moments of mutual holding; the poet or the reader doesn't walk through or with the poem but *sits there*,<sup>91</sup> as in a room, and then moves on, perhaps returning, again and again, perhaps not.

Like an actual room, the single-page small poem is marked, scored, trimmed, and maintained by the hands. It, too, can convey familiarity and strangeness simultaneously at a discrete site—there is something roundly unnatural about enclosed, rectilinear spaces of habitation or visit—and, because the page-housed poem is small, contained, and tangible, it is capable of being experienced on repeated occasions, as with a room.

Small poems are provisional enclosures, redoubtable living spaces. As with a niche or an alcove used to display an object, space and thing become conjoined.

A *redoubt* is a retreat, a stronghold. *Redoubtable*, on the other hand, means formidable, fearsome. The etymologies here are divergent, but the two words come together in the adjectival form, which mischievously bears the former word as if it were its root.

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<sup>91</sup> For a noteworthy citation of the significance of a home or a room as a seat, see Thoreau's *Walden*:  
Wherever I sat, there I might live, and the landscape radiated from me accordingly. What is a house but a *sedes*, a seat?—better if a country seat. I discovered many a site for a house not likely to be soon improved, which some might have thought too far from the village, but to my eyes the village was too far from it. (60)

This double-sense of redoubtable, like the inside-out, subversive etymology of “manipulate,” rescues the word from a monolithic usage with problematic connotations. “Redoubtable” justly envisages the small poem as something whose diminutive size and enclosed page-space does not mean it is a work of *closure* or timid, fearful withdrawal. In the early 1930s, when Oppen was writing the pieces of *Discrete Series*, the rooms of either houses or books offered potential means of shutting out the surrounding tumult of the times. Retreating into the home, reading well-wrought lyric poems as a form of aesthetic escape, or (synthesizing the two) ensconcing oneself in a room *in order to become* comfortably “lost” in the room-like pages of books, are notoriously isolating ways of separating one’s self from, ignoring, or developing illusory notions of a given set of material conditions. The redoubtable small poems in *Discrete Series*, though, push against such chronic and total retreats. If their page-rooms, and the book itself, exist as spaces of rest and contemplation, they do not finally lull the reader into respite from the world but instead arrest the reader with recalcitrant language, challenging her to think harder about how words work and to turn attention back to the complex things and situations that occasioned such writing.

Oppen’s poems, by his own account, are “‘imagist statements’” or constructions that show a deep faith in the activity of perceiving substance and space. In this sense the poems are *redoubts*. But, as Louis Zukofsky put it in a letter to Ezra Pound, the texts of *Discrete Series* might also be perceived as constituting very different kinds of space: managed “voids.”<sup>92</sup> In this sense the poems are *redoubtable*.

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<sup>92</sup> Michael Davidson writes that Zukofsky wrote of Oppen’s “particular way of managing a certain type of ‘void’” (*NCP* xvii). See also, for an evocative corroboration of this view, Oppen’s own words in a letter to Cid Corman: “I look for the thinnest possible surface.—at times, no doubt, too thin, a hole, a lapse... There is no point in defending lapses—but that is, of all risks the one I plan to live with. I am much more afraid of a solid mass of words” (*Selected Letters* 40). In the final sentence, it is telling that Oppen poses his own “lapses” against

Whether I am reading Oppen's book as I walk through the city, while standing in a desert, in the passenger seat of a moving car, or amidst the dead silence of a spartan, candle-lit monastic cell, each page I face and read pulls me into its distinctively furnished room, holds my attention, bracingly, and then *pushes me back out*, towards another page-room and towards the realities both denoted and connoted in the poems.

Oppen's early small poems bear witness to the convergence of thinking, writing, and the experience of the "outward clash" of American modernity. Each discrete text, as such, therefore preserves a space that recognizes, receives, and also recasts<sup>93</sup> the seemingly unassimilable facts "Of the world, weather-swept, with which / One shares the century."

## Conclusion

Lorine Niedecker's handmade gift-book "Next Year Or I Fly My Rounds, Tempestuous" and George Oppen's *Discrete Series* are complementary prototypes of small-poetry execution in twentieth-century America. I have presented each model in light of a certain Peircean category and a certain metonymic figure—firstness and hands for Niedecker's book, and secondness and rooms for Oppen's—but ultimately these are meant to illustrate associative distinctions, not pronounce rigid alignments. Indeed, the synthetic and more synoptic argument of these chapters is that all small poetics evince particular compounds of firstness, secondness, hands, and rooms. Thus each 1934 work of small poetry exhibits, in some degree, the elements I've associated with its counterpart work.

Even though Oppen's poems are rigorously and formally deployed in a proper book, and even though his language mostly consists of stark, world-charting nouns and flat declarations

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"massive"—in the implicit connotative sense of large or swollen—language. And of course there is no more sympathetic ear for such partisanship than Cid Corman's.

<sup>93</sup> Michael Davidson writes that for Oppen, "history had to be recreated in the poem" (*NCP* xx).

(foregoing the intimations and spiraling energies of speech), his texts are still infused with raw curiosity and indeterminacy; a mind in action, choosing words or line breaks for their suggestive possibilities; the serious “play of (writerly) musement.”<sup>94</sup>

And even though Niedecker’s “Next Year” pieces are playful, allusive, sometimes ultra-terse transcribed speech-acts—like riddling notes left on a kitchen table for someone to find—they nonetheless index (at times wryly or cryptically) an enveloping reality of “brute force,” struggle, and loss. Niedecker sought to draw on “magic of dream and deep subconscious and waking isolation thick with impenetrability,” but she did this so that she might “portray [her] epoch and truthfully evoke life in its totalities” (qtd. in *LNWP* 181).

Both writers witnessed and were deeply affected by the Great Depression that followed the 1929 financial crash, and they responded with books of small poetry, experimental yet realist engagements with language, books whose ostensible modesty and tininess belies a “barbaric asceticism” that repudiated largeness and other “false riches” of American modernity. Lyn Hejinian’s characterization of the impinging conditions is concise and powerful. At the beginning of this chapter, I cited her reference to the “historical trauma” of the Depression, which made the “shock effects so characteristic of capitalist modernity” more “particularly acute.” Several pages later, she more pointedly calls the 1930s a period “when the *large-scale, invasive, and ruthless* character of capitalist modernity was becoming suddenly and ubiquitously obvious” (58, emphasis added).

Facing and living within such a time, Niedecker and Oppen forewent *overt* opposition to 1930s bad conditions. That is, they did not create art that perpetrated or projected obvious violence, as reaction in kind. But their poems do *figure* violence and *show signs* of wear,

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<sup>94</sup> See, for an excellent example of this (there are many such moments, some only a word or phrase, in *Discrete Series*), the poem beginning “I, plant, breathe.”

endurance, disorientation. Thus these independent (we might even say “wayward,” in an affirmative sense) objectivists employ the merest lyrical rudiments to radicalize, through a sort of aesthetic contortion, the documentary impulse so vital to art of the 1930s.<sup>95</sup> A Walker Evans photograph thrusts before the viewer’s eyes a framed representation—immediately and nonverbally affective—of some emblematic particle of broken America: an advertisement or a sphinx-eyed farmer. An Oppen poem, on the other hand, such as,

It brightens up into the branches  
And against the same buildings

A morning:  
His job is as regular. (*NCP* 31)

because it consists of dry black letters on a empty page, makes no initial claim on the reader’s mind and feelings when the page is turned and the poem is merely *looked at*. Yet when the poem is read and considered, its recalcitrant referential words, traceable syntax, and spare overall scale *suggest* the very same thing that Evans’ photographs *depict*. The poem uses words referentially to direct attention to the existent, experienced world, but the poem also draws special attention to itself as a concrete thing that inhabits that same real world.

As the examples given above show, many of Oppen’s poems are far less discernibly imagistic than this one; they draw as much or more attention to themselves as linguistic assemblages as to some conjured scene. The vital point, though, is that small poems can use poetic form and linguistic signification to evince a particular kind of emblematic realism. Lyn Hejinian more or less settles the question of the reconcilability of realist and experimental

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<sup>95</sup> Several noteworthy recent studies of this are Morris Dickstein’s *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* (2010), Jeff Allred’s *American Modernism and Depression Documentary* (2009), Mark Goble’s *Beautiful Circuits: Modernism and the Mediated Life* (2010), and Joseph Entin’s *Sensational Modernism: Experimental Fiction and Photography in Thirties America* (2007).

approaches to language, at least as far as Oppen is concerned, when she excerpts and juxtaposes two of his unambiguous statements on the matter:

Oppen's notion of *things* takes reality as a given, at least at a pragmatic, if not a supernal, level. "I speak of a Realist poetry: Realist in that it is concerned with a fact which it did not create"<sup>96</sup> (*SL* 140). His writing, as a result, has an indexical character: "the nouns do refer to something; that it's there, that it's true, the whole implication of these nouns; that appearances represent reality, whether or not they misrepresent it: that this in which the thing takes place, this thing is here, and that these things do take place" (Dembo 163). ("Preliminary" 52)

The realism of *Discrete Series*, especially in light of such remarks from Oppen, is more patent than Niedecker's, though as I have argued above, contending with Elizabeth Robinson, Niedecker's poems also "take reality as a given" at a pragmatic level. They demonstrate a faith that "these things"—things referred-to but also writing and reading themselves—do indeed "take place."

It is this last parenthetical point that really sets Niedecker and Oppen apart as small-poetry exemplars; they fully invested themselves in textual strategies of articulating a realist barbaric asceticism. Of course they do this by placing spare lines onto discrete pages to constitute a *book*, as I have noted, but they even, at times, call attention to their own textual embodiment. One of Oppen's poems reads, "Not by growth / But the / Paper, turned, contains / This entire volume" (33); another one begins "Written structure, / Shape off art, / More formal / Than a field would be / (existing in it)—" (35). Niedecker's reflexivity is characteristically more playful: there is the poem beginning "Don't worry about the comma, darling," and the one that asks (without asking) "All night, / all night, / and what is / it on a

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<sup>96</sup> Note how strongly Oppen's avowal here echoes Peirce's emphasis on reality as that which is precisely "independent of the vagaries of you and me" (*CP* 5.312); something "I" run up against, negotiate, and attempt to fathom.

post- / card” (both included above). We’re prompted to respond by asking, of any of her veiled subjects, what is “*it*” on a pocket calendar page?

Juxtaposed with Niedecker’s work, Oppen’s marshalling of poetic and textual strategies seems so much more complete and definite, more monumental as a small-poetry template. But I want to affirm Niedecker’s book (I mean for that word to stand for the *gestalt* of its interwoven verbal and material elements) for the very reasons it appears to be less important or less substantial than Oppen’s: its playfulness and ephemerality.

“Next Year’s” inky, handwritten lines are much more gestural than Oppen’s. They carry feeling and perception and the lively force of speech, such that their meaning or content is often indeterminate. Jenny Penberthy candidly calls them “non-sequitur and baffling lines” (*Sulfur* 1997). In the work, the handwritten, as such, asserts a quick, whimsical, intimate style, a domestic comportment over a generalized, aestheticized “modern” one. One might almost cite a winsome sloppiness in the writing, which is also nonetheless evidently put down with scrupulous care. The ephemerality of the work is partly conveyed by the handwriting itself (along with the book’s other physical features—smallness, cheap materials, hand-cut and –pasted pages) and also, finally, by its status as a one-off gift. Creating a book and then sending it to someone is the opposite of publishing in the formal, institutional sense. There is indeed something boldly ascetic about Niedecker’s act of completely abandoning a poetic work—“throwing it away,” in a sense—so that it might reach the hands of a reader.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Two passages, both roughly contemporaneous with “Next Year,” spring to mind in correlation to this work and act of Niedecker’s. The more expected one is simply Laura Riding’s call, in 1929, for a “poetry of designed waste” (*Anarchism* 18). The other passage is from William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936):

And so maybe if you could go to someone, the stranger the better, and give them something—a scrap of paper—something, anything, it not to mean anything in itself and them not even to read it or keep it, not even bother to throw it away or destroy it, at least it would be something just because it would have happened, be remembered even if only from passing from one hand to another, one mind to another, and it would be at least a scratch, something, something that might make a mark on something that *was* once

Jenny Penberthy perfectly encapsulates all of these operations and significances of “Next Year” when she calls it “a free and delighted collaboration of cogency and chance. It is assured, worldly, funny, at ease with its liberties” (“Editor’s Note”). Ultimately, such a poetry is the more dynamic model of small poetry in the twentieth century. The book certainly stands as an adumbrating template for the page- and book-based poetry that Niedecker continued to write (during Oppen’s hiatus from poetry); and it has remarkable consonance with a whole array of other small poetries written through all of the decades leading up to the present one.

Placing distinctions aside, though, for the moment, in order to make a conclusion, we can see that both quasi-objectivist poets committed themselves fully to presenting *books* of small poems, books that were not linear sequences but mere ensembles of leaves, “disjecta membra,” sheaves of spare, strange notations.

Both books demonstrate a certain brazen faith in language and in material form as they might coordinate mind and world. They argue implicitly that a whole spectrum of experienced realities—order, recurrence, handiwork, thingliness, referentiality, intimation, hardness, wildness—can be best combined to significant effect in small discrete things (poem and book), and that those objects can be interpolated as antidotal ruptures into the vast administered reaches of American time and space, circa 1934.

They oppose the excesses that surround them with their own inverted excesses: their obstinate refusal to use pretty or coherent or fluid language; their refusal to trumpet explanations of their methods and purposes; their audacity in calling the slightest, untitled text a

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for the reason that it can die someday, while the block of stone cant be *is* because it never can become *was* because it cant ever die or perish (101, author’s emphasis).

poem; their wasteful displaying of these texts on pages that could accommodate much more language.

Small poems—considered as grouped texts or as a composite book—announce themselves as oddballs. They are not useful or reliably amusing, and they don't instructively affirm or mimic the chief American mythoi: machines and nature. They present, instead, evidence of writing's potential (and right) to take form as an art of discrete, constructed fragments.

## Chapter Four: Mincing Words in a Time of War

There should never be permitted, confusion—  
(William Carlos Williams, *Spring & All*)

A momentary stay against confusion...  
(Robert Frost, “The Figure a Poem Makes”)

The greater the clutter attacked and the smaller, the purer, the residue to which  
it is reduced (the more destructive the tools), the better the poem.  
(Laura Riding, *Anarchism is Not Enough*)

Niedecker’s most characteristic poems inhabit the page architecturally,  
as if she meant to build pure, essential structures that hang in space, in  
tribute to and defiance of the floods that shaped her life.  
(Mary Pinard)

This chapter initiates, principally, the second broad movement in a consideration of Lorine Niedecker and George Oppen as small poets, and I aim here to complement more than simply extend the material in the first movement. I argued there that one version of the “barbaric asceticism” Adorno calls for in the midst of World War II can be found earlier, in the 1934 writings of Niedecker and Oppen. Their small thorny works—“Next Year Or I Fly My Rounds, Tempestuous” and *Discrete Series*—stand at once as indexes of, reproaches to, and reprieves from the poverty and disorder surrounding them in the 1930s.

Post-1934, both poets drew back and adjusted, renounced former practices, simplified their investments. Oppen of course made the radical adjustment of bowing out of poetry writing altogether, but Niedecker consolidated her poetics too. She stepped away from the more demonstrative and more voluble linguistic experiments she had been producing and into a consistently small form she classified as a kind of experimental “folk poetry.” She began writing these “New Geese” (a reference to the Mother Goose poems she imagined herself responding to and revamping) in the mid-1930s, and that writing culminated in the publication of Niedecker’s first book, *New Goose*, in 1946. The ultimate result of these “retreats” or

adjustments for both poets, however, was a durable, confident, extensive poetics. Niedecker, without any hiatuses, wrote and published continually up to her death in 1970, and Oppen, once he did recommence writing poetry around 1958, persisted through the late '70s.

This question of a timeline and of careers is so important here because these two poets' writing lives straddle that monumental watershed in American arts and culture, the Second World War. And as this is a study of twentieth-century American poetry, and more particularly a study with an eye to violence, the looming question here is what happened to the forms and meanings of Niedecker's, Oppen's, and others' small poetics when those works found themselves in the face, then the teeth, then the shadow of that cataclysm? The influence of the war and its aftermath on American poetry is well-rehearsed, but there is some potential obfuscation in the reckoning of Niedecker's and Oppen's post-war poetry. Because both of them, and Objectivist poetry generally, resurfaced and came to real prominence in the 1960s, there is an associative tendency to group their very distinctive, small experimental works too summarily with the experiments of a more fully post-war generation. I want to look back, carefully but incisively, at this time of war—stretching, on a long view, from the early '40s through at least the early '60s—to show that small poets in this era incorporate and respond to violence in their own distinctive ways, according to resolutely independent forms and practices established before the war.

If Niedecker and Oppen, during their own lifetimes, were linked perhaps too rigidly to the late modernist nexus of Objectivism, they have more recently been championed as forerunners and early practitioners of that emphatically post-World War II constellation of “New American Poetics,” and of what might be called, more generally, postmodern poetry. These modes of writing, influenced especially by Olson's “Projective Verse” (1950), have

privileged formal experiment and direct engagement with experience over content or rhetoric, and have generally announced the freedoms, processes, and materials of language itself. There are valid linkages here, mainly in that such readings accurately locate Niedecker and Oppen on the more exploratory and less conventional side of literary history, but such rubrics often do not adequately acknowledge the extent to which these two poets (and others besides, of course) elaborated and held to a poetics of their own, to a staunch yet subtle way of both indexing and repudiating the confusion and the glut of the age, in its several forms.

### **Negativity & Commitment**

Many of Niedecker's contemporaries, especially following World War II and into the '60s, were incorporating parataxis, elision, disjunction and other breakages into "wrecked" or collaged poetics, but where other New American poets tended to revel in proliferative, wordy *openness*, Niedecker maintained a resolute but canny allegiance to a counter-poetics of page-*enclosures* and spare, discrete texts. Oppen, too, enacted a negative poetics—practiced "forms of refusal," as Michael Davidson has it—after 1934, but this did not take shape as small poetry again until the late '50s, when he began scripting the lines that would become the book *The Materials* (1962). The intervening years, the time of poetic "silence," saw Oppen organizing labor strikes, making furniture, fighting and suffering injury in the Second World War, and retreating to Mexico with his wife and daughter to escape CIA harassment. Such a life of drama and movement is a far cry from Niedecker's austere, rooted existence in Wisconsin during those decades, and yet when Oppen did begin to write again in the early '60s, his poems and his poetics exhibit a telling

consonance with Niedecker's poems of that time and with the poetics she had been honing for almost thirty years.<sup>98</sup>

Neither was it "with the grain" for experimental poets to write only poetry, to refuse to hold forth in prose apologies, explanations, and theorizing pronouncements about poetry, a renunciatory position that Oppen and Niedecker exemplified consistently and conscientiously, notwithstanding a couple of exceptions (Oppen's essay "The Mind's Own Place" is perhaps the only true one). To be sure, both poets thought long and hard and dynamically about their own poetics and about poetics in general, evidence of which abounds in their varied correspondence and in Oppen's *Daybooks*. Still, with regard to louder, wider fora, they kept rather cannily quiet. Unlike so many of their contemporaries, they did not propound "programmes," systems, or official prose-driven positions on poetry. If anything, they were anti-programmatic, staunchly self-exempted from systems.

In an essay on Niedecker and Basil Bunting, Peter Quartermain notes that they "firmly resisted the temptation publicly to explain what they were up to," and later adds that neither "theorized a poetics, theorized their position" (281). The same could be said of Oppen (who is, as it happens, quoted in the essay), and Quartermain's account of such a position's significance resonates as strongly with Oppen's forms and practices as it does with those of the other two: "it's certainly true, after all, that any statement *about* any poem is inevitably more abstract, more general than the poem under view. Any such statement is, finally, a retreat from the poem" (281). Likewise, for these poets any apparent aloofness from expected modes of "being a poet,"

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<sup>98</sup> That is not at all to suggest that the poems in *The Materials* would ever be mistaken for those in Niedecker's *My Friend Tree* (1961) or her handmade book *Homemade Poems/Handmade Poems* (1964) (The first rendition bore the first title, and for the remaining two, Niedecker changed the title). Nonetheless, there is still a consonance in how both 1930s-schooled poets chose to present spare collages of lines, shaped but deliberately coarse, as the most vital, necessary way of bearing witness to the early 1960s, when rigor and persistent smallness were not the norm in experimental American poetry.

whether avant-garde or conventional, is finally, actually, on behalf of poetry. At risk of casting a little religious light on things, it might be said that each poet followed a sort of quasi-monastic<sup>99</sup> *via negativa* as challenge to the more dominant American modes of *via positiva* and (arguably foremost, the ideal of supposed moderation and reason) *via media*, even though such a conception ought not to be taken very rigidly, and certainly cannot be extended beyond their poetics. That is, it would be perverse to suggest that the struggle and solitude experienced by both poets, and especially that which Niedecker dealt with continually through the better part of her lifetime, were always matters of preference; and it would be grossly misleading to imply that these two quasi-objectivists were not fully engaged with and passionately attentive to the world. They were certainly that above all else. Insofar as asceticism is applicable to Niedecker and Oppen, it is in the word's Greek sense: discipline, rigorous inquiry, and deliberative practice, not retreat or self-loathing.

In an essay on George Oppen, Rachel Blau DuPlessis succinctly captures the gist of this dialectical vocation. She says that he

writes *a poetry of negativity and commitment*. Like Paul Celan, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno, Oppen asks in every word how to make art, what art is possible, what must be said given the pressures and demands of our position in history. (“Uncannily” 203, emphasis added)

Though it differs in each case, this synthesis of negativity and commitment is the hallmark of every small poet's practice.

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<sup>99</sup> Thomas Merton is an unavoidable figure of note here. The Catholic monk-poet, almost all of whose books were published by New Directions, vehemently voiced the sorts of anti-capitalist, anti-positivist protests and anxieties voiced also in the poetry of Niedecker and Oppen; he was planning to include a portion of one of Oppen's poems in his book *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1968), as Oppen notes in a May 30<sup>th</sup>, 1966 letter to Charles Hanzlicek, *Letters* 318-320); and both small poets owned a copy of Merton's *Raids on the Unspeakeable* (1966), a book of essays and austere, abstract drawings.

### Breakages, Piles of Limbs, Mincing Words

Most of the writers associated with the New American Poetry, formed their poetics *in the wake* of the cataclysm of World War II. The war precipitated their exploratory modes of open-field, disjunctive, and anti-establishment writing, whereas for poets like Niedecker and Oppen the war erupted into the middle of who they had already become as adults. In looking at these two poets mid-century and into the early 1960s, I want to maintain the sense that their small-poetry barbaric asceticism was a deliberate poetics carried into and through the war, not a response determined *by* it. Like many of their fellow modernists, Niedecker and Oppen (born in 1903 and 1908, respectively) came of age just following the First World War and well prior to the Second World War, and they wrote well after the latter ended. Each one's poetics, their sense of themselves as writers, had already been fully formed by the late '30s when the war began; thus their poetic responses to the world during and after the war must be reckoned as sober, deliberate, knowing responses, decisions to adjust or to maintain one's established ideas about and methods of using language. Thus, Niedecker and Oppen demonstrate a vein of small poetry whose post-war forms of refusal have deeper roots than the shock of the war itself.

Lisa Samuels, poet and editor of Laura Riding's tour-de-force early prose work, *Anarchism is Not Enough* (1928), provides a useful characterization of this earlier generation of American experimental writers to which Niedecker and Oppen belong. In an interview, Samuels recalls a sort of conversion that followed her experience of "some of the core texts and ideas of the real revolution of 'modernism'...Stein, WC Williams, George Oppen, Georges Bataille, Mina Loy" ("Interview"). With the exception of Bataille, all the writers mentioned are in effect small poets or progenitors of small poetry, and we could easily slide Niedecker into the

list. Tellingly, pointing to what I argued about the 1934 small poems of Oppen and Niedecker, Samuels calls this cast of figures “The ‘broken’ writers, the Blakean modernists.” These she sees standing apart from “the smoother, more Wordsworthian modernists” like Eliot and Stevens and Yeats (though she also cautions against a too-binaristic division along such lines). Like the word “damage,” “broken” is a vexed way to describe writings, much less writings one means to affirm. Samuels doesn’t really clarify her usage in the interview, but it is obvious that what captivated her and what she means—paralleling my own intentions here—concerns an incorporation of violence into the processes and forms of writing. Stein, Williams, Loy, Oppen, and Niedecker are clearly not “broken writers” in the sense of being hobbled or having capitulated. Rather, they are driven by and evincing the stresses of innovative language-use; they tend to eschew the conventional aesthetic values of elegance and ornamented style in favor of language that feels constructed and urgent in its physicality. This amounts to what might be called a curated, shaped “brokenness.” Of course these particular writers are also noteworthy for their use of free-verse line-breaks, and, in the small poetry cases, page breaks.

There is one further meaning of break that is germane to this juncture of (modernist) poetry and violence: the idea that the poem, or rather that certain types of poetry, can effect forceful, salutary separations, breakages. A syncopated and discrete single-page form, itself a sort of sundered object, has a unique capacity to break some reader out of inured, unbroken familiarities. Ricocheting off of Lisa Samuels’ interview and into the 1928 Laura Riding book she edited and introduced, we find the following remarkable passage from Riding:

Every poem of this kind is an instance of fulfilled originality, *a model, to the reader, of constructive dissociation: an incentive not to response but to initiative.* Poetry is properly

an art of individualization as opposed to the other arts, which are arts of communication. (*Anarchism* 114-15, emphasis added)

Riding refers to a certain “kind” of poem here because she sees this “constructive dissociation” as a rare inversion of what poems usually do. In general, she believes that “Art is an exaggeration of the hostile operation of reality on the individual consciousness, an exaggeration proportioned to overcome originality” (113). Riding sees this hostile operation at work in the average poem, which is only affirmed “in the sense that it achieves a value equal to an exceptionally ‘good’ experience; it is an especially high-class object, one that makes use of all man’s powers for restructuring reality” (114). Most art-works, including most poems, tend to induce resemblance- and association-centered responses in the witnessing consciousness, thus merely enhancing and rearranging what is still a hypnotic sense of an acceded-to reality. Riding’s startling counter-thesis is that “man’s powers for reconstructing reality are really a misuse of his powers *for constructing himself out of the wreckage which is reality*” (114, emphasis added). Thus a poem that sharply differentiates itself from other poems and from communicative language, enacts a *breakage* for the reader, an “incentive not to respond but to initiative” (114). In effect, we might say that such a “constructive dissociation” from the wreckage of a chaotic or inuring reality requires precisely an abrupt, discrete, *wrecked* poem—a category I see distilled in what I have called the small poem.

Indeed, Riding’s strongest and most succinct characterization of poetry’s counterforce sounds uncannily like a small-poetry motto: “It is poetry, on the other hand [versus prose], which is properly *harsh, bare, matter-of-fact*” (116).

In Riding’s paradigm, any language that upholds and reinforces a rhythmic, socially normative, organized, continuous “reality”—whether or not that language looks like poetry—is

prose, which is “an inclusive medium” whose “merit depends on its fullness” (116). Disrupting this fullness, breaking in on and away from it, is poetry’s work, and such work is accomplished most effectively by what Riding essentially describes as small poetry:

The purpose of poetry is to destroy all that prose formally represents. It is an exclusive medium, and its merit depends on the economy with which it can remove the social rhythmic clutter of communicative language.... The end of poetry is to leave everything as pure and bare as possible after its operation. It is therefore important that its tools of destruction should be as frugal, economical as possible...The greater the clutter attacked and the smaller, the purer, the residue to which it is reduced (the more destructive the tools), the better the poem. (116-117)

This conception, of course, is a vision commensurate to its time; in particular, in the insistence on the possibility of a “pure” poetry, it bears a touch of modernist idealism that may seem discordant with my characterization of small poetics and with the epoch of World War II and its aftermath. Thus far, I have stressed what might be called the *impurities* of small poetry: the firstness-infused, terse, skewed utterances of Niedecker’s “Next Year” book; the coarse collages of *Discrete Series* that index the “brute force” of secondness in the ‘30s. These poems have renounced the perfectionism of purity as such; they are, instead, perfectly content in their carefully shaped raggedness.

Nonetheless, there is no real inconsistency between Riding’s vision and mine, though there is a tension, one that coincides with a tension she self-consciously includes in her rubric. On the one hand, she is merely enacting a trenchant rhetoric when she insists on the purity of poetically rendered reductions. Still, if a poem is “harsh and bare,” bears “tools of destruction,”

and finally amounts to “residue,” then it is hardly *pure* by any common, rationalist definition, which is of course the point. Indeed, at the outset of *Anarchism is Not Enough*, Riding contends that “the only productive design”—that is, the only poesis that can transcend anarchism and the “hostile operation of [sanctioned] reality”—is “*designed waste*” (18, emphasis added).

This 1928 prescription of a poetics of meaningfully designed waste, of constructive dissociation, anticipates the very kind of aesthetic paradox Adorno calls for in *Minima Moralia* in 1946. In both accounts, a poetics that is in various ways “small”—physically diminutive, bare, abrupt, aloof—concomitantly and inseparably evinces some sort of violence—harshness, dissociation, breakage, waste, renunciation. And in both cases, the significance of such poetry, its vitality and timeliness, owes to contexts in which life seems to have become too-integrated and swollen, thus deceptive and destructive. Adorno argues, after all, that barbaric asceticism in art is necessitated by a situation where “progress and barbarism have become...matted together in mass culture” (50). During or soon after this time of war, several American poets echoed Adorno’s view of a turbulent cultural climate: some of the most notable are Wallace Stevens’ memorable figuration of poetry as “a violence from within that protects us from a violence without...the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality” (1940), Charles Olson’s aggrieved cry “All now is war” (in the poem, “The Kingfishers,” 1950), and Muriel Rukeyser’s noting that America’s economic, business, and political operations hinge on a “concept of perpetual warfare” (1949).

Small poets share this sense but articulate it through form, through a certain kind of making. Though the world, and the United States’ presence in the world, changed radically through the ‘40s, ‘50s, and ‘60s, Lorine Niedecker and then later George Oppen (once he returned to poetry in the late ‘50s) held firmly to the same basic form of writing with which they

had begun in the 1930s, continually adapting small poetry but sticking firmly to it as a vital type of response to turbulent circumstances. Instead of turning away from the short lyric-like poem, they recast it, burrowing into it and dismantling and rebuilding it, again and again.

Thus Oppen's and Niedecker's forms of language evince a heightened sense of both "negativity and commitment," of dissociative yet non-anarchistic breakage from the illusory "false riches" of positivist accounts of reality. If the poems, in their piecemeal brevity, come across as refractory, hesitant, abrupt, or obscure, that is because the poet has found these qualities in the world, or, in perhaps a more sound formulation, because the poet has found her own mind, her own language, manifesting these small scripted voicings as vital, necessary reactions to the impingements of experience.

‘ ‘ ‘

Thus far, I have emphasized the central significance of line breaks and compositeness in small poetry. I have also posited hands and rooms as pertinent small poem figures in Niedecker's and Oppen's early work—their early poems are "redoubtable manipuli"<sup>100</sup>—and now I want to collect these several notions together by introducing a third figure: limbs, specifically small poem lines *as* limbs. This will involve a re-theorizing of the part-whole status of small poems after World War II, their fragmentary character, and, connected to this, the part-whole relations of discrete poems within certain books or groupings.

Although William Carlos Williams effectively introduced the sort of small poetry that falls within my purview, his famous definition of a poem as a "small (or large) machine made of words" is a conceit that finally does not suffice, especially for the former category of cited, the

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<sup>100</sup> That is, they are formidable, room-like handfuls. See Chapters Two and Three for extended engagements with these two words.

putative “small machines.” That which is “made of words,” necessarily cannot be a true machine or mechanism, and vice versa.<sup>101</sup>

A long poem might perhaps begin to evince certain machine-like repetitions and processes; likewise, a poem that continues in reams of language that run across page after page might be said to mimic and conjure that other familiar conceit of poetry: the entirely natural organism or process, a tree, say, or a recombinant strand of genetic code.<sup>102</sup> But linguistic signs, especially versified sequences of them etched into framed spaces, are not natural in the way other biological forms and codes are. They have, in a way, their own nature—expressive, thought-inducing, full of meaning yet finally irreducible through analysis—and small poems more than any other kind of poetry bring this sharply to view.

A small poem takes form not so much as a “body” or “face” and certainly not as the “small (or large) machine made of words” imagined in W.C. Williams’ dictum; rather, following the Second World War, Oppen and Niedecker, along with several other younger poets like Robert Creeley, Larry Eigner, and even Sylvia Plath in her last book, each pursued a discriminating poetics wherein small arrangements of words are conspicuously partial and fragmented and halting. Their relation to bodies is metonymic, not metaphoric. Calling on the prescient words of Laura Riding cited above, I contend that small poems in a war-time and post-war American context do not evoke the form and organization of familiar objects (like machines), but instead offer a “casual, disorganized resistance” to the illusory “reality” of the socialized status-quo as well as to that of any promulgated poetic systems. Small poems’ diminutive and sharply partial character, what Riding praises in poetry as a “harsh, austere,

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<sup>101</sup> See Jeffrey Peterson’s “Lorine Niedecker: Before Machines” (*LNWP* 264ff.).

<sup>102</sup> Interpretations along these latter lines, especially of experimental writing, have flourished in recent decades, and have introduced a rich, persuasive new angle of approach to poetics. See, for example, Steven Meyer, recent works of “Ecopoetics,” and especially Joan Richardson’s *A Natural History of Pragmatism*, which concludes with a chapter on correlations between Stein’s writing, William James’ thinking, and genetic code.

matter-of-fact” (116) quality, is the very thing that sets small poems so forcefully apart from what surrounds and overlaps with them.

Thus their fissured lines and pages are salient “models of constructive dissociation” (114) from “the land of plenty” (Olson); from a mass culture of “false riches” where “progress and barbarism have become...matted together” (Adorno); from the “perpetual warfare” of economics, politics, and business (Rukeyser); and overall from the mid-twentieth century’s “violence without” (Stevens).

Thus also these small page-housed texts—each page and each book—are not really like whole bodies or machines or well-wrought objects; rather they are *piles of limbs* that stand as emblematic counters to all machines and to all large or loud masses of words with their “social rhythmic clutter” (Riding 116). Even as such poems counter “the hostile operation of reality on the individual consciousness” (113), which is in fact a false or inert reality, they attest to the fact of reality’s “hostile operation” and in so doing intensify the reader’s realist sense of the continual and potential interplays (which are not at all primarily representational) between mind and world, language and experience.

Recollecting and fusing the several figures posited thus far, then, small poems in America might be best understood as handmade piles of limbs that afford room-like spaces of reflective pause and realist initiation. George Oppen practiced such a poetics in the 1930s and then again in the ’60s and ’70s. And Lorine Niedecker constructed significant little wrecks, textual sites—the page and also the book—of metonymic realism where partiality, disjunction, and smallness bear witness to a bewildering reality and also challenge it by speaking of it in the form of benign interruptions.

In this chapter, I will consider Niedecker's short folk poems that culminated in the book *New Goose* (1946) and formulate a theory, relying heavily on James Scully's essay "Line Break," about how lines and line breaks create limb-like, small exceptions to projectivist prolixities. Then, in the following chapter, I will examine some of Oppen's *Materials* poems in light of this theory and in light of his talk "The Mind's Own Place"; then turn to Niedecker's handwritten gift-book *Homemade/Handmade Poems* (1964) as an exemplary culminating model, a sort of *ars poetica*, of all of these recalcitrant commitments and dimensions of small poetry.

‘ ‘ ‘

The line-breaking, line-arranging, and poem-ending techniques so prominent in the poems of Niedecker and Oppen are literally ways of *mincing* words. Such mincing makes for sometimes elliptical language and is often regarded as evasive, especially under urgent conditions where "all now is war." But certain ways of mincing words in a time of war can be efficacious. The deliberately spare and severed texts that Niedecker, Oppen, and a few others present in the 1940s, '50s, and early '60s have a three-fold significance. First, their persistently metonymic uses of language, that is, their syntactical and semantic attention to parts and contiguities, allows their poems to be curious and indeterminate and also bracingly realist.<sup>103</sup> (Peirce will continue to make appearances, though brief and infrequent, with a view to the clarification of this idea). Second, the breaking and collaging of lines and the brevity of small poems—resulting in somewhat "obscure" works—can unsettle or disorient the reader in productive ways, begging questions and prompting re-readings. Finally, though their negative techniques in part disorient, the small poems of Oppen and especially Niedecker in the '60s also *orient*; they give

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<sup>103</sup> Again, I want to emphasize that I mean realist in the philosophical sense, that is, the phenomenological and ontological sense, not the colloquial or intramural literary sense. The small poems examined below are not exactly *realisti*; for example, nor do they convey any salient tone of rationalism or stoic moral resignation (as meant in a statement like "I neither hope nor lament too fervently, as I take a realist view of life").

pause; each line break and most of all each page break—that is, the “handmade room” of each discretely text-housing page field—together constitute a distinctive kind of *break* for the reader: an interval. Despite being at times cryptic in their partiality and metonymic compositeness, the poems do evoke speech and reality—their limbs are severed but articulate, gesturing to voice and body—thus, in their fidelity to human experience through language, their realism, they afford sites of orientation. Small poems figure a violent and disorienting time but also intervene in it, thus meaningfully mincing words in a time of war.

**“[A] tare in the side / of all my ties”**

If Niedecker and Oppen both flourished in the '60s, decades after a shared early '30s nascency, it is worth noting that their respective views of their earlier writing stand apart. In brief, when Oppen returned to the writing of poetry, he wrote in reference to, and in affirmation of, the poems in *Discrete Series*.<sup>104</sup> Niedecker, on the other hand, made a decisive move away from much of her earliest writing (much of which Zukofsky tagged, somewhat disapprovingly, as “surrealist”), an inventive array of genre-flouting, exploratory pieces with which “Next Year Or I Fly My Rounds, Tempestuous” inevitably finds itself grouped. In effect, Niedecker’s decision to exclude any of these writings from the several “selected” and “collected” books assembled later in her life amounts to classing her early work as juvenilia, or say as part of a less choate, anomalous early stage in her vocational evolution. The poetry Niedecker first admits into the viable or at least cohesive delineation of her oeuvre is the “folk poetry” she began writing around 1935. Her own decision on this point is reason enough to give separate attention to these poems, but there are stronger reasons besides. Niedecker’s Mother Goose-inspired folk

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<sup>104</sup> See his definitive 1968 interview with L.S. Dembo for Oppen’s later view of his earlier work.

poetry—culminating in her first official book, *New Goose*, in 1946—is a vast, richly variegated, consistent body of small works that constitutes a full-fledged poetics. It lodges a timely challenge—quiet yet utterly bold and self-assured—to the decimations of mass culture and also, as Peter Middleton so effectively delineates,<sup>105</sup> to the conventional logics of the (often masculinist) avant-garde.

During this ten-year period, Lorine Niedecker cultivated what became her abiding form and method: a mischievous, small but plastic reinvention of folk poetics. In the experimental single-page folk poem she struck upon a flexible but sturdy vehicle that would propitiously facilitate her several most vital impulses and commitments: vernacular speech-acts, swerving flights of mind, documentary attention to facts, and brevity. As I have argued, these are the very things that are synthesized in Niedecker’s “Next Year” collection of small poems. Even though that handmade book is singular as a visual-material work of playful appropriation, it is also the first rendition of what was to become Niedecker’s fundamental form of writing. Thus 1934’s “Next Year” is the nearest antecedent, in kind, to 1946’s *New Goose*, a true adumbration of Niedecker’s poetics to come, her folk-poetry manuscripts that followed most immediately, but also most of the books or collections assembled throughout her life. Such a view of “Next Year,” though no one has yet espoused it explicitly, should not be too surprising, as Niedecker began writing folk poems (expressly) just after sending the “Next Year” book, in 1935, then submitted groupings of the poems to journals in 1936.<sup>106</sup> Furthermore, beyond mere proximity, the more central issue of poetic continuities argues for this correlation. When Jenny Penberthy calls “Next Year” “a free and delighted collaboration of cogency and chance” and summarily

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<sup>105</sup> In his essay “Lorine Niedecker’s ‘Folk Base’ and Her Challenge to the American Avant-Garde.”

<sup>106</sup> In 1936, after unsuccessfully submitting a manuscript of sixteen short poems to *Poetry* magazine, Niedecker submitted a near identical seventeen-poem grouping to the journal *New Directions*, under the title “Mother Geese.” Editor James Laughlin published the whole gathering in issue one of that year, and thus commenced in full Niedecker’s folk phase.

describes its bearing as “assured, worldly, funny, at ease with its liberties” (Editor’s Note, *Sulfur*), she might as well be characterizing the fundamental elements in all of Niedecker’s poetry that followed. Penberthy herself corroborates this, in effect, in her preface to a 2002 re-publication of *New Goose*; she writes there that Niedecker’s folk poems show clearly that “[t]he nonsensical, the zany, the aleatoric, familiar to her from her early Surrealist writing, held continuing appeal” (NG 8).

Thus, neither the 1935-’45 folk poems nor Niedecker’s poems in subsequent decades really did forfeit any so-called surrealist tendencies; if anything, she became more and more confident in cultivating the looser, associative poetic energies that stretched outside of objectivist (that is, in a sense, rationalist) tenets. This dual commitment to, or bridging of, folk realities and poetic exploration, is what makes Niedecker so difficult and so rewarding as a small poet. It is also the thing that distinguishes her, finally, from other smaller-scale, line-scrupulous poets like Robert Creeley, Larry Eigner, Cid Corman, and also George Oppen in her poetry’s capacity to enact Laura Riding’s dialectical charge: beginning firmly with the “New Goose” poems and then continuing, Niedecker’s small poems attack and dismantle but also bespeak the clutter of the time. They are like re-shaped pieces of debris, austere and “matter-of-fact” yet possessing, in structure and texture, the intriguing materiality of carefully crafted souvenirs.<sup>107</sup>

Much of the intriguing materiality in Niedecker’s folk poems pertains to their curious use of form and rhythm. Like the Mother Goose poems she was invoking and reimagining, her small verses are most often structured according to a salient but coarse rubric of rhythm and rhyme, and the poems incorporate, often by name, curious figures and events. Title-less and

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<sup>107</sup> Although I am not giving particular attention to the larger cultural and psychological significance of souvenirs, my discussion of portability and keepsake objects in Chapter One should indicate my sense that small poems at least have the capacity to participate in such orientations of self to the vast worlds of experience. Susan Stewart’s simple definition, from *On Longing*, is worth citing here: “The souvenir therefore contracts the world in order to expand the personal” (xii)

compact on the page, many of them read like half-sung, half-mumbled strains from some longer, half-remembered songs or narratives. Here are two such poems from the “Mother Geese” manuscript, the group published in 1936:

Jim Poor’s his name and Poor Jay’s mine, his hair’s aflame not worth a dime	or he’d sell it.	Troubles to win and battles to bin and after a tare in the side of all my ties and barn dances.
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(*LNCW* 85-86)

The first of these employs the conspicuous folk element of named characters, here a pair of twin-like men whose chiastic appellations reflect both each other and the times in a tragicomic way. The comment that follows the speaker’s mannerly introduction turns into a sort of joke, but the gravity of the context implied and the structure of the verse make the punch-line land with a muted, poignant sound, rather than a jaunty rim-shot.

The description of Jim Poor’s hair as “aflame” suggests bright red hair (of course the descriptor “red” is itself idiomatic), yet the abrupt and matter-of-fact way the statement is made ensures that the literal image—the weird, terrible vision of a burning head—haunts the poem like a portent. And why is this man’s hair being considered at all, much less in relation to its putative value? Eventually, the words are revealed as the set-up for a joke, but all of this unfolds too quickly and laconically to dissolve the effect of non-sequitur near-nonsense, phrases used more for sound than sense. Like many of Niedecker’s folk poems, this one has, on the surface, the ordered and conventional structure of a nursery rhyme. The metrics are uneven, though, especially after the first two lines, and the second rhyme is off: the vowel rhyme of “dime” with “mine,” after the true rhyme of “name” and “aflame,” unsettles the *abab* quatrain just as it closes. The subtle loosening of rhythm and rhyme here adds a tinge of sonic

dissonance to lines whose sense has already become dissonant and unclear. The final line, “or he’d sell it,” does clear up the poem’s sense a bit—*we’re so poor my buddy here would sell his red hair if he could*—but structurally it is an odd, severed afterthought, a dangling piece of text hooked onto the bottom edge of an already completed quatrain. The way the poem concludes only at a point of spillage or estrangement lends it a peculiar poignancy. The words already lack any rhyme relation or a discernible rhythm, thus giving the speaker’s punch-line, at best, a tone of radically distilled deadpan. The severed, floating quality renders the line even darker somehow. The voice here ends up sounding weary, even bitter, about an experience of poverty that precipitates jests about selling oneself in some way.

The second poem above is a different creature from the first, though it begins in a similar mode, its brisk, trochaic, rhyming couplet suggesting that similar conventions will drive the rest of the poem. Instead of referring to named figures, the poem speaks vaguely of tasks to be accomplished; the voice sounds absent-minded, or deliberately obscure, as it seems to have mixed up “troubles” and “battles.” Even that appearance breaks down, though, in the use of “bin” as a verb. We can imagine winning battles, maybe even troubles, but how does someone *bin* anything? (For lack of other meanings, we perhaps imagine storing something, placing it inside a bin.) The third line, starting like line two with “And,” both interrupts the movement of the poem’s beginning and links it to the poem’s second act. Ending the line abruptly at “after” hints at enjambment, but further reading suggests it merely indicate a temporal situation that the speaker is foretelling, as if a phantom colon were after the word: *several things to accomplish, then comes a sharply delineated aftermath*. The next four lines continue and conclude in the riddling mode established from the start, even though a speaker and a few particulars—tare, ties, barn

dances—are included. As it turns out, these apparent trappings of stability actually compound the gripping *instability* of the poem's denouement.

“Tare” complements “bin,” confronting the reader with more simple-looking but distorted diction. The phrase in which it is used, “a tare in the side,” brings to mind the image of a “tear” (that is, a laceration, not a lachrymal), which is certainly how an auditor would interpret the line if it was merely read aloud. In fact, “tare” is an archaic spelling of “tear,” lending weight to the immediate, aural reading; but the word also denotes the weight of some cargo's receptacle or wrapping—implying a possible correlation with “bin”—and also, in an entirely different direction, a noxious weed, as the word is used in the King James version of Jesus' parable about separating the “the wheat” from “the tares” (Matthew 13.24-50). Whether she was conscientiously wielding an obscure usage or just mischievously tweaking the spelling of a common word, Niedecker here creates a dense, enigmatic aura of urgency around the homophones that are invoked. All of the meanings of “tare” or “tear”—and even the mournful meaning of “tear,” which lurks, as a homonym, inside the visualized grapheme—convey violence or a serious accounting of some kind, a sense more pronounced here where it results from an engagement with troubles and battles.

The speaker imagines not a tare in her own side but “in the side / of all [her] ties.” As with the first poem discussed, these lines reintroduce a measure of rhythm and rhyme that offer a rough echo of the poem's beginning. But where lines one and two have an almost stately bearing by virtue of their parallel anapestic feet, multisyllabic words, and true rhyme, the couplet of lines four and five is somewhat haggard, its clipped, semi-iambic meter and its mere hint of a rhyme (in the disparate pairing of “side” and “ties”) matching the speaker's movement into more fanciful fragmented terrain. The speaker's reference to all her “ties” most strongly implies

relations in the general, colloquial sense—familial, friendly, professional; concrete and abstract; desired or obligatory—but the meaning is left shadowed, and it is even less clear how ties of any kind might have a weed or a wound or a shipping-weight “in their side.”

We learn in the poem’s final lines, six and seven, that this tare is also in the side of all of the speaker’s “barn / dances.” This simple, concrete, stock signifier of folk revelry is the exact opposite of the first lines’ troubles and battles; thus in one sense, by merely being included in the poem, it has an animating and brightening effect. As it is actually used, though, the phrase carries a wry, even sardonic sense that is abetted by the way the lines stray completely outside of the text’s neatly compact fold, becoming a fractured afterthought. Whatever the tare is that will be (“after”) in the side of everything, the suggestion is that those things will be not just interrupted or marked but *marred*, deranged in some way in the fallout of certain unavoidable labors and frays.

Both poems, therefore, hint at troubled lives through abbreviated and curiously sculpted language. Niedecker simultaneously features and plays small havoc with conventional poetics. The first poem above hews more closely to a Mother Goose folk model, whereas the second poem exemplifies the “zany...aleatoric” streak Penberthy mentions (thus giving this poem a strong resemblance to many of the “Next Year” poems); but both poems demonstrate the fundamental *modus operandi* in Niedecker’s folk poems, wherein “the predictability of the form often clashes with the unresolved riddling and cryptic content” (Penberthy, *NG* 8). Applying this statement to the two poems included above, poems from 1936, “the form” in question is clearly a very brief, Mother-Goose-like group of rhythmic and rhyming lines, and the “content” here, however riddling and cryptic, clearly pertains to experiences of hard times. Niedecker’s earlier poetry contains intimations of poverty and of a world of “brute force,” as I have argued,

but in her folk project these realities enter directly into the poems, in the form of raw facts, threads of narrative, actual excerpts from colloquial speech, and candidly rendered plights. From the folk poetry on, Niedecker's writing addresses struggles unsentimentally but vigilantly. Elizabeth Arnold encapsulates this rare kind of poetic witness:

When Niedecker's poems take up the human condition, they tend to assume an emotionally tough, slightly skewed, attitude-bound slant that says there's a mind at work here, a (hurt) heart, the terseness, what is not said, driving the commentary. (100)

We might rightly bridle at that vexed parenthetical insertion "hurt," but leaving that aside for now, the description gives an apt idea of the complexity of what we might call Niedecker's small-poetry ethos. The last comment in Arnold's sentence, the one calling attention to scale and freighted reticence, is especially incisive, and happens to resemble closely another assessment of Niedecker's work, A.E. Stallings' simple declaration: "The unsaid haunts these poems" (223). Both critics' words were penned in reviews of Niedecker's *Collected Works*, and thus they are really responses to her entire oeuvre. Such comments do justly apply to the work as whole, which is pervaded by a sense of the unsaid and the unsayable (the latter category is especially germane to Niedecker's ever-vital engagements with non-human things and realms). But the poems written from 1935 to 1945 were the first and arguably most potent demonstrations of the particular characteristic Arnold and Stallings assert, that is, Niedecker's singular capacity to craft discrete textual complexes that all at once evoke both *spoken* and *unspoken* dimensions of experience.

The folk poetry—particularly that portion rendered into book form as *New Goose*—amounts to a challenging (often warranting those aforementioned adjectives "riddling and

cryptic”) species of documentary art. I hesitate to use the term documentary, as I do not at all mean the sort that is enchanted with (that is, in thrall to) ideals about representation, about the feasibility of objectively capturing bits or swaths of “real life.” I mean rather that Niedecker’s *New Goose* bears an analogous kinship to Oppen’s *Discrete Series*. That book, unofficially subtitled “The 1930s,” indexes said epoch in fragmentary but deliberate language, and *New Goose* also, though in its own way and from a different vantage-point, indexes its time—it could justly carry a subtitle too, something like “Late ‘30s, Early ‘40s: Poverty and Wartime.” For both small poets the documentary bent is distinctly experimental and stems from a zealous but scrupulous investment in fragments and details, both those fielded in experience and those that might be constructed from words.

‘ ‘ ‘

1936, the year Niedecker first submitted her folk poems for publication, was the same year James Agee and Walker Evans travelled to rural Alabama to begin the first-hand research that would later be published as *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). Niedecker’s “Mother Geese” and “New Goose” poems are like small-poem counterparts to the prose writings and photographs in that book, tenaciously experimental and realist at the same time.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> It is worth citing a few passages from Agee’s Preface to the groundbreaking work, notes that figure some compelling correspondences between his project and Niedecker’s. Some of his principles and techniques he articulates explicitly might be compellingly considered as implicit aspects of Niedecker’s folk poetry:

Actually, the effort is to recognize *the stature of a portion of unimagined existence*, and to contrive techniques proper to its recording, communication, analysis, and defense. More essentially, this is *an independent inquiry into certain normal predicaments of the human divinity*. The immediate instruments are two: the motionless camera, and the printed word. //The governing instrument—which is also one of the centers of the subject—is *individual, anti-authoritative human consciousness*. // Of this ultimate intention the present volume is *merely portent and fragment, experiment, dissonant prologue* (xiv, emphasis added).

### *New Goose*

As I noted above, Jenny Penberthy writes that in Niedecker's folk poems "the predictability of the form often clashes with the unresolved riddling and cryptic content" (NG 8). Using the term "*the form*" is somewhat misleading here, as in fact the fairly large body of poems in question here (eighty-seven in total, that survive) runs an astonishing gamut of formal permutation. The poems vary in size and shape: some are only two lines or a mere dozen words while others stretch to as many as sixteen lines; some consist only of longer lines, others of short lines or an amalgam of both. There is also a great deal of diversity in the range of tones and named things, that is, the content, which is not always cryptic, and whose ways of riddling are myriad and usually rooted in plain, familiar language. While a majority of Niedecker's folk poems do incorporate elements of rhyme and meter, as a group they are distinguished less by a single set form or a type of content than by what might better be called a genre or idiom, a sort of Mother Goose lens.

There is, however, a consistent formal aspect that characterizes all of the folk poems—their chiseled smallness. This smallness, I would argue, is what Jenny Penberthy's statement "the predictability of the form" best pertains to. Text after compact text, each one discrete and free-floating, appears to the reader such that the cumulative effect is of encountering a heterogeneous assortment of fragments (an effect enhanced by their almost exclusive lack of titles). This achievement of Niedecker's folk poems, their impressive range of tensions and evocations within a consistently small scale, is most keenly observed when the poems are deployed one per page in the form of a book, as are the forty poems in 1946's *New Goose*. Composed primarily between 1938 and 1942, when Niedecker was working as a researcher and

editor for a WPA-sponsored guide to Wisconsin, the book was published by James A. Decker Press, as one of thirty “Pocket Poetry” books they published that same year.<sup>109</sup>

In textual terms, then, the book bears some uncanny congruencies to George Oppen’s *Discrete Series*. That book, containing thirty-one poems, each on its own, otherwise blank page, is bound in green cloth and measures 5 inches by 7 inches. *New Goose*’s barely larger group of poems is arrayed just as trimly and starkly on their respective pages; her book is also bound in green cloth; and its dimensions are even smaller, a mere 4 ½ by 6 inches. Niedecker’s book is just as deserving of Eliot Weinberger’s description of Oppen’s book—“a tiny book of enigmatic poems” (ix), a book whose constituent texts and whose form as a whole object imply scrupulous, reductive sculpting. *New Goose*, like the handmade gift-book “Next Year Or I Fly My Rounds, Tempestuous,” is a discrete series but a much more full-fledged one. By 1946 Niedecker had developed a confidence in creating small, folk-inflected poetic structures; because of this well-established mode of writing and also because the book carefully frames the carefully shaped texts in vivid, formal ways—in standard typeface at the upper-center of commodious page-fields—*New Goose* heightens many of the small-poetry effects and techniques that were only emergent for Niedecker in 1934.

The poems in *New Goose* were written and revised in a time of unstable economics, war, modernization, and, in some realms, inflated language (though no Pulitzer Prize for poetry was given in 1946, it is instructive to consider *New Goose* in relation to the 1947 recipient, Robert Lowell’s *Lord Weary’s Castle*). To call on Riding’s terms once more, Niedecker’s spare poems

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<sup>109</sup> In his essay “Natural and Political Histories,” Jonathan Skinner notes that “To explain the format, Decker’s jacket notes affirm that ‘a book of poetry, more than any other kind of writing, should be of a size that can be ‘carried along’ with the reader” (51). This is a simple but powerful affirmation of that very complex of small-poetry values I have been asserting: the special significance of portable texts, which significance is ramified and compounded when a small book is filled exclusively with small poems. Skinner muses on the way this affects *New Goose*, whose “small format...reinforces the sense of *New Goose* as a handbook or primer, in the tradition of Mother Goose. It also hints at a field guide dimension” (51).

mark, attack, and generally intervene in this “clutter” in many different ways, creating multiple discrete instances of benign “dissociation” from stultifying, illusory pseudo-realities. The best means of getting acquainted with this multiplicity is to take a sort of whirlwind tour of the book’s most noteworthy poetic types.

One common type of poem in *New Goose*, following the lead of the pair of poems cited above and several others in the 1936 group, involves a ground-level voicing of weariness and disillusionment over bad economic conditions. Sometimes such conditions are only hinted, but elsewhere, a poem will take form as a wry, vivid indictment:

I doubt I'll get silk stockings out  
of my asparagus  
that grows too fast to stop it,  
or any pair of Capital's  
miracles of profit. (*CW* 103)

The comic, surreal image of deriving silk stockings from asparagus turns out to be a matter-of-fact description of a dysfunctional system of exchange, a system where such an exchange would indeed be surreal, a far-fetched (impossible) “miracle.” And lurking under the funny opening image, the plainspoken voice, the loose but progressive meter, and the conspicuous feminine semi-rhyme at the end, are more subtle elements Niedecker has packed into the poem to give it density: an internal rhyme in line one, a plaiting of *s* and *p* and *t* consonants, an ironic weighing of excessive natural growth (“too fast to stop it”) against the abortive promise of excessive financial growth (“profit”), and a play on pairings (those that exist, like stockings, as discrete commodities, and, implicitly, those wildly mismatched things that constitute a possible exchange).

Other poems in the book use a first-person vernacular voice, but forego any Mother Goose structure of rhyme or meter. The following piece seems to have been snatched wholesale out of some strange conversation and then lineated; its poetic qualities are those of regular speech: plain declaration and reference, the repetition of words, and, at the end, a casually expressed bit of grotesque hyperbole.

The museum man!  
 I wish he'd taken Pa's spitbox!  
 I'm going to take that spitbox out  
 and bury it in the ground  
 and put a stone on top.  
 Because without that stone on top  
 it would come back. (101)

Almost all of the poems I have cited thus far have been from in an anonymous first-person voice, but *New Goose* contains several poems written in a sort of adapted, ventriloquized voice of some historical figure, usually a man. Poems of varying shapes and lengths have Niedecker speaking on the page as Du Bay, General Rodimstev, Audobon, and Vincent Van Gogh.

Another related but briefer text reports, using the third-person presentation:

Asa Gray wrote Increase Lapham:  
 pay particular attention  
 to my pets, the grasses. (105)

This poem is like a documentary haiku (and a good example of what Rae Armantrout meant by the creation of poetic silence through “[d]eliberately [creating] the effect of inconsequence”).

Of course it is more than a random excerpt; whether it was found in this exact form or molded into the present shape, the poem boasts an irregular but sturdy web of sound-threads and, centrally, the odd, touching, mythic fancy of dotting on plant life, relating to it as one would animate creatures.



that is more somber and portentous—but they both feature an unknown person prompted to laconic self-reflection by some object.

Another category of poems in *New Goose*, the category in fact that most interests me, is that which concerns violence. As the years of the book's composition were years of poverty and war, most of the poems carry some stamp or moment of violence. Some poems, though, take it on in full, explicitly, evincing horror in a few bare lines:

They came at a pace  
to go to war.

They came to more:  
a leg brought back  
to a face. (102)

The word “war” is all that is necessary to signal to the reader that actual violence, actual dismemberment in this case, is being invoked. Such explicit elements of violence play crucial roles in *New Goose's* small-poem barbaric asceticism, but here as elsewhere I want to show how denoted or connoted wreckage can be accompanied by violence in a poem's form, in the elisions and tensions inherent to a piecemeal arrangement of short lines. Let's look at one exemplary poem from *New Goose*, one of the sparest in the book, which fuses thematic and prosodic violence:

The music, lady,  
you demand—  
the brass  
breaks my hand. (94)

The poem is clearly an address, but the speaker and situation are shrouded. It is a brusque, bitter, and cryptic grievance—the kind one whispers privately to oneself through clenched teeth—whose force is bound up in its fractured but deftly poised parts. In spite of the mid-line

comma, the first line initially strikes the eye as a descriptive reference: “The music lady.” When the next line’s “you demand” establishes a more complete phrasal structure and makes the second person address evident, the reader properly brackets “lady” as the person spoken to and must then renegotiate the poem’s first words, the subject: *which* music is demanded, since the definite, demonstrative article “the” is so central to the crisis being cited? Because some “lady,” some “you,” is addressed directly in the poem, Niedecker immediately animates the poem not with any vivid concrete image but with the drama and intimacy of human relations (compare this poem, for example, to those imagist touchstones that begin “so much depends / upon / a red wheel / barrow” and “The apparition of these faces in the crowd”).

We do not know which music is demanded, who the impolitely addressed lady is, or why said music is demanded. The terms are abstract, but, because they are spoken, they are sharply accented and compel interest.

The words here are also given force through line breaks. The first break, after only three words, compounds the strain in voice already exhibited in the interruptive, comma-bracketed aiming of the utterance—“lady”—thus leaving the redundant and clarifying “you” to the second line. And the second line break anchors the entire poem’s energy in its hinge-like long dash. Instead of supplying a predicate verb to accompany and complete the two-line subject, the speaker stops at the imperious lady’s enigmatic “demand,” coughs or swallows in the form of the dash, and then starts over from a more concrete but equally cryptic angle: “the brass.” This third line, the shortest in the poem, parallels the prior subject, “The music,” in grammatical form but also in content. “Brass” is connotatively metonymic to music, so it is a move in the poem toward concreteness, but hardly a move toward clarity: is the word an adjective that will modify what follows on the next line—“The brass / band” or “horn” perhaps? Or, if it is a noun, as

indeed it is revealed to be, just *what* brass (kind, shape, location?) is the speaker talking about and what is its relation to the lady and her musical mandates?

The poem's conclusion is forceful, a compression of sound and image that heightens the drama in play but flatly refuses to supply answers to such questions. Lines three and four together, "The brass / breaks my hand," burst out from the poem's caesural dash. Where the first two lines merely cite "the music" and imply an antagonistic dynamic, the final two lines explicitly declare an event. "The brass" (a metonym for a trumpet or trombone, perhaps?) occupies its own line, and thus signifies only in a broad, insinuating way at first. This third line is also the smallest line, visually and syllabically, so it effects the sort of prosodic interruption we have already noted as one of Niedecker's recurring techniques in the folk poems: the line abandons, breaks with, the iambic meter of the first two lines, and it also seems to be broken itself, prematurely truncated. What context or reference warrants the definite article, and is "brass" a noun or an adjective? The fourth and final line, beginning with the verb "breaks," confirms that it is a noun, the subject of a sharp sentence. "Brass / breaks" is an enjambed alliterative spondee whose line-break-spanning double-stresses and percussive *br* sounds illustrate the very thing that the words denote semantically: an expression of a quick, rhythmic fracture. The harsh *k* sound in "breaks" recollects the same sound in "music," lending more consonantal force to the final declaration. And, following a pattern remarked in other folk poems above, the shift from multisyllabic words and more urbane inflections (in the first two lines) to raw, terse, monosyllabic plain-speak forcefully presents the latter type of language as the privileged kind. Many of Niedecker's poems implicitly put forth the idea that an assemblage of lines is most significant when it moves towards and culminates in pared-down, direct phrases. Such language, as that found here, can candidly indicate urgent realities yet be so pared down

that it remains compellingly mysterious, still firmly bound up with the poetic, textual whole of which it is a part.

In the end, the poem does land firmly on the true rhyme of “hand” with “demand,” but this rhyme only cinches the bitter utterance into a tighter knot. The speaker’s presence, only implicit in the formal address of the poem’s first two lines, finally enters the poem physically and self-referentially in “my hand.” But this is only a synecdochic assertion; the single hand that stands for the speaking person is, in the poem, dissevered from a body, and on top of this it is itself “being broken” (the present tense “breaks” implying an recurring or in-process action). The poem’s closing half, in both sound and sense, is a trenchantly expressed grievance; thus the tight snap-seal of the rhyme only makes the grievance, the sense of injury, more decisive, rather than clarifying any narrative context or driving home some choreographed “point” or digestible meaning. Instead, a plurality of meanings emerges from the way human speech is *excised* from blurry flows of private or public life, broken into lines, then formed and *incised* onto an empty page. Niedecker’s scrupulous attention to form is practiced not “for its own sake” but as a singular means of signifying actual experiences of overwhelming, sometimes wounding circumstances.

This tiniest of poems, then, uses internal interruptions and the encompassing interruption of its exceptional brevity, as techniques for presenting a fractured glimpse into a scene of fracture and frustration (I might even advisedly say “damage”). Like the poem above, beginning “They came at a pace,” this poem contains limb-like lines of text and also metonymic references to discrete, injured human parts; it is also, then, a kind of war poem, or at least a poem that signals a *time of war*, as might be said of all the *New Goose* pieces. Although these usually untitled poems, in both content and diction, often court the ordinary, the trivial, the

seemingly inconsequential—“[D]eliberately [creating] the effect of inconsequence,” it should be recalled, is one of the means to the “poetic silence” theorized by Rae Armantrout)— the *New Goose* folk poems, taken attentively and together, persistently attest to a world of force, imbalance, and privation. Thus even though some of the pieces, looked at discretely, may seem like odd but quaint portrayals of down-on-luck figures or moments, mere *vignettes* of violence, they are not actually vignettes at all; in fact it is precisely a consummate resistance to decorative or mannerly scene-painting that characterizes Niedecker’s approach to persons and situations.<sup>110</sup>

The breaks and breakages and smallnesses of Niedecker’s poems, especially her folk poems, enact, therefore, a sort of emblematic realism; it is apt that *New Goose*, a small book of small poems, “hints at a field guide dimension” (Skinner 51), as its writings do indeed afford a kind of oblique, composite, yet forceful sense—a knowledge, even—of the troubled “field” of the world at the time. Eleni Sikelianos, in an essay that expressly engages questions of war and fracture in Niedecker’s poems, makes this argument in pointed, eloquent language:

Lorine Niedecker, possessed of one of the most distinctive senses “for everything,”<sup>111</sup> quietly recorded the presence of things that fly through the air and explode in the body and mind. Many of us may not have noticed the disjunctures of a world gone to war in Niedecker’s poems because we were dazzled by other elements, such as the deft handling of phano- and melopoeia, her silence, her geohistory, her sora rails. (31)

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<sup>110</sup>At times, the poems even explicitly address and give riposte to the tendency to find small, pitiable things quaint, perhaps nowhere more roundly than in the final line of this poem from the “New Goose” manuscript:

Seven years a charming woman wore  
her coat, removed the collar where it tore,  
little warmth but honor in her loose  
thin coat, without knowing why  
she’s so. Charming? Well, she’s destitute. (*CW* 111)

<sup>111</sup> Sikelianos is citing Louis Zukofsky’s axiom, in the essay “Poetry,” that “Poetry if anything has a sense for everything” (*Prepositions*+ 3).

Sikelianos' essay, "Life Pops from a Music Box / Shaped Like a Gun," considers all of Niedecker's oeuvre but begins with a focused consideration of the violence and disjunction so evident in *New Goose*, when the book is "read in its entirety" (32). She notes that many of the book's poems that were not included in later collections "are about the world being torn asunder" (32). She also makes the very case I have been arguing about those poems in *New Goose* that are not directly about war, that they, too, "are haunted by themes of aggression, loss, or folly" (33).

The subtitle of Sikelianos' essay is "Dismemberments and Mendings in Niedecker's Figures," but it strikes me that it might have suitably borne alternate subtitles: "Significant Little Wrecks" or "Lines as Limbs." I do not know of any other critical engagement with Niedecker—short or long—that so effectively takes account of violence in her work, the relations in her poetics between harsh realities and deliberately small, fractured text-forms. Specifically, as her subtitle and the above phrase about the world being "torn asunder" makes clear, Sikelianos has a keen sense for how parts and breakages and partiality create, in effect, emblematic realist connections between poem (and book) and world. These connections do not happen in terms of metaphysical principles but in terms of metonymically charged bodies, where any and every type of disruption—economic, military, social, or syntactic—is felt, realized, and associated. Many of Niedecker's poems, claims Sikelianos, "articulate versions of *a world or the body* carved into parts" (33, emphasis added). Worlds and bodies reflect and are implicated in each other in their susceptibility to forces that carve, or we might better say their tendency to take on fissured and *limbed* forms. Poems like Niedecker's can "articulate" these interrelations precisely because they are themselves "carved into [limb-like] parts." If Niedecker, in Depression- and War-time, witnessed and recorded "the presence of things that explode in the

body and mind” (32), she incorporated those same properties into the records themselves, the poems, which have their own powers of disruption or detonation.

Late in her essay, Sikelianos asks, almost rhetorically, as if on Niedecker’s behalf: “What to do, in the poem, with a world tattered by fact?” (37). The question is well-put, but her ultimate conclusion, her view of what Niedecker does in the face of this question, becomes somewhat problematic. Sikelianos speaks of Niedecker’s recurring habit of “melding...an interior and an exterior world,” the way she “brings disparate parts together into the body of the poem” (34). Here her appraisal is sound. But the terms used and the import alleged change as the paragraph continues. Niedecker is said to demonstrate

a conscious interest in re-marrying opposites: the domestic and the political, the folk and the national, the animal and the human, the human and the geological. We can see this compulsion to connect elements as a way to deal with a shattered world. In her despair over the world’s disintegration and the split of the once “uncuttable” atom, might she have been after a subtly healing art? (34-35)

Niedecker certainly brings together disparate and sometimes opposite elements, but to insist that she “re-marries” them is to impute a dialectically synthesizing reflex that does not apply to Niedecker at all. She arranges and juxtaposes and suggestively connects certain words and facts, but there is no sense of this practice stemming from *compulsion*. That word and the assumption of her “despair over the world’s disintegration” effectively pathologize Niedecker’s fragmentary poetics, setting up the suggestion that she was really “after a healing art.” In keeping with the sequence of terms in the subtitle, the dismemberment and violence recorded in the poems give way to a redemptive vision of Niedecker’s power of “mending.” Faced with a world “tattered by fact,” writes Sikelianos, Niedecker sought to stitch things back together into wholes, to “re-

build” the broken world. She brings in this view mainly in reference to the longer poetic sequences of Niedecker’s later career. The mending argument perhaps makes most sense in reference to these later works, but the implication is that it is a decisive, evolutionary advancement in Niedecker’s career; thus the more palatable idea of a tattered-world-healing art retroactively supersedes the difficult idea of an art that is itself intentionally tattered or wounded.

I do not want to discount too rashly the stitching analogy here or even the stitching-as-healing concept (even Niedecker herself, after all, once made a sarcastic, off-hand reference in a letter to her “poem-knitting,” qtd. in Knox 28); it is apt, illuminating phrasing to say that Niedecker’s poems, early and late, show a “dexterous plaiting of sundry elements” or that she “adroitly weaves the threads” of various particulars (Sikelianos 39-40). But this veritable mythos of mending and healing, which is ostensibly a way of affirming Niedecker, also reinforces certain unjust and patriarchal conceptions of her as a fascinating “poetess,” a homespun savant. It threatens to simplify and neutralize and make quaint a life and a body of poems that are complex and riddling, through and through.

It is almost uncanny how closely this critical situation parallels a crucial moment in Susan Howe’s *My Emily Dickinson*. Howe cites Susan Gilbert’s and Sandra Gubar’s affirmation of Dickinson’s healing poem-stitchery, which almost seems to have inspired Sikelianos’ characterization of Niedecker:

The stitch of art is provident and healing, “a stitch in time”...Healing, the stitch of art is a bridge...But the cleaving of “I felt a Cleaving in my Mind” and the chasm of “This Chasm, Sweet,” are patched and mended, seam to seam, by the magical stitchery of art. (qtd. in Howe, *MED* 14)

Howe's response to the passage is a sharp retort: "Who is this Spider-Artist? Not *my* Emily Dickinson. This is poetry, not life, and certainly not sewing...[Dickinson] was an artist as obsessed, solitary, and uncompromising as Cézanne" (14). I do not mean to conflate implicitly Niedecker and Dickinson, even Howe's Dickinson—the two poets' differences are just as salient and important as their similarities—but these parallel critical figurations do, I hope, show how even well-intentioned and affirmative readings sometimes have a way of defusing what is most challenging and "uncompromising" in certain small poets, especially those who are women. On the one hand, as in Elizabeth Robinson's reading of "Next Year," the disjunctive and elliptical aspects of Niedecker's writing can be too hastily construed as indications of skepticism; on the other hand, those same elements can be too glibly celebrated as modes of redemptive "quilting." Neither view is entirely off-base, but they both risk subsuming some of the essential complexities that are always at the heart of Niedecker's verse. In an earlier chapter I argued against Robinson's ultimate conclusions in order to preserve a sense of Niedecker's confident, capable playfulness, and here I dissent from Sikelianos' conclusions to give Niedecker due credit for *refusing* to reconcile opposites, mend tears and breaks, or claim any ambitions toward a "healing art."

A reader of *New Goose* may or may not derive some intimation of healing or reconciliation from the book's spare poems, but she will undoubtedly have a sense of those poems as fractured, cryptic, partial testaments to tough times. The texts sometimes gesture more to war itself, to "a world or the body carved into parts"; at other times or in other ways the poems enact another dimension of the epoch, what Elizabeth Arnold incisively describes as "the stunned quality of abject poverty, its distance from the exhilarations of the warmongers and the warplanners" (106); and thirdly, however disjunctive or laced with pathos the poems are as a

group, many of them pivot around comedic or playful elements rather than abject ones. Thus, in charting their time, the poems also afford moments of respite from it, little counters to it, which is not the same as mending or healing ills. In other words, it is precisely the *way* Niedecker's folk texts record a time of war—by “mincing words” in speech-inflected yet fragmented phrases, rustic yet intricate collages—that allows them to enact what Arnold calls instances of “halt” amidst that same time of war (106).

Such breaks or halts can also be framed in relation to confusion. Poems that are difficult to understand at first glance are said to be confusing, but in certain cases, when the poems are small and carefully crafted, the very aspects that perplex can prove to attract and focus the mind (and body) *out* of a larger, enveloping state of confusion. Peter Nicholls' concise appraisal of the *New Goose* poems makes this effect clear. Significantly, it is in an essay called “Rural Surreal,” that he posits for Niedecker a surrealism not of “hallucinatory” effects but one where “two distant realities” are juxtaposed, which amounts to a kind of experimental realism (198). (Also noteworthy is Nicholls' use of the term “small poems” here, one of the very few such usages I have found in all of the myriad critics who have engaged the poets in this study.) Nicholls refers to the *New Goose* poems simply but very aptly as “abbreviated, often rhyming lyrics with [a] frequently gnomic subtlety” (207), and then observes that “These small poems revel in a false lucidity, pretending ease of access even as their sound-patterns hint at incommensurable and largely unspoken complexities” (207-08). These comments echo Jenny Penberthy's words regarding the meshing of familiar forms with “riddling and cryptic content.” The poems welcome the reader in—in place of “false lucidity” we could say “alluring, straight-faced obscurity”—only to challenge her with gnomic subtleties, hints, and complexities, all of which are accomplished through Niedecker's deft arrangement of lines and all of which make each

single-page poem a site calling the reader to pause, engage with non-discursive language, and orient herself to the worlds to which the poem gestures. An apparently disorienting—“riddling” or “gnomic”—text can also serve to mitigate confusion.

The poems in *New Goose* and the book itself bear witness the 1930s and early '40s as a time of scarcity, disorientation, and war. In 1939, Robert Frost suggested a poem could achieve a “momentary stay against confusion” (“The Figure a Poem Makes”). Niedecker’s pieces are much less discursive and less formalist than the poems Frost likely had in mind (poems resembling his own, we would suppose); therefore, although they provide brief stays against the besieging confusion, they also exhibit that confusion in a pointed way, as I have argued.

The confrontation of confusion as a central modern and American crisis is also voiced in a much earlier and much more small-poem-related moment in American poetry. “The Red Wheelbarrow,” perhaps the most notorious small poem of common record, made its initial appearance modestly enough in 1923, slipped in amongst the dynamic, alternating corrugations of prose and verse in William Carlos Williams *Spring & All*. Just after the group of poems containing the untitled wheelbarrow piece, Doctor Williams returns to prose and offers this half-sardonic diagnosis and prescription:

[L]ife is absolutely simple. In any civilized society, everyone should know  
 EVERYTHING there is to know about life at once and always. There should  
 never be permitted, confusion—//There are difficulties to life, under conditions  
 there are impasses, life may prove impossible—But it must never be lost—as it is  
 today— (*Imaginations* 139)

Information, perceptual overload, constitute the crisis here, and thus the real problem, humanly speaking, is how to “make sense” of or just how to endure the “EVERYTHING” that happens

and is known. How to stay sane and in some sense efficacious becomes the challenge. If “confusion” is not permitted, is deleterious, then what is the opposite of confusion? Not merely the antidote but the contrary and corresponding state? Is it peace, clarity, abstract understanding, pragmatic knowledge?

Small poems like those in *New Goose* do not answer these questions, nor, of course, provided answers were agreed on, could they be said to *achieve* any such putative states outright; but they do interrupt confusion with their intimate, ordered, discrete groupings of language. The poems are essentially a *formal* strategy of response to overwhelming, deleterious conditions. In this case the form is constituted chiefly through techniques of attending to actual human speech and to experienced facts; rendering those things as writing; shaping, breaking, and arranging the written lines into groups; then placing those groups in roomy page-housings. These are mainly aural and manual techniques, constructions of a scale and kind that bespeak the immediate technologies of the hands rather than the mechanical technologies of mass production, bureaucracy, or battle.

In this sense, the small folk poems that Niedecker wrote in war-time connote the human, conjure the notion of some body that scored certain pages and positioned words and lines in groups.<sup>112</sup> Again, the small poem is not a little machine but a presentation of limb-like parts.

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<sup>112</sup> As I have been arguing, though, in another sense, a sense effected through the techniques of elusiveness, partiality, and collage, said small poems offer a reprieve from the human, from those habits of the human that tend to delete or damage life: war, glut, confusion. Stéphane Mallarmé’s quasi-mystical declaration about “words effacing themselves before sense” speaks to—if it doesn’t quite *describe*—one of the distinctive effects of small poems like Niedecker’s folk poems (qtd. in Cutts 12). These texts, so evidently constructed by some person’s hands, nonetheless *efface* themselves, to the degree that they are expected to create a simple encounter, to disclose the recognizable *face* of a self or a meaning, in the sense captured by *prima facie*—a thing should be “self-evident” upon initial examination. As self-evident as they are on the page, as text-objects, small poems by nature trouble the workings of the honest, reasoning face: they are disfigured, faceless, or turned away; they inexplicably point to other cases or testify in cryptic, unhelpful ways; they bring forth scanty, impertinent evidence, metonymic evidence, scattered and “unserious” evidence, but evidence nonetheless.

And foremost among the techniques Niedecker employs in her craft is the scrupulous *managing of lines*: she makes lines and line breaks as such central to every poem's form and effect; that is, she deliberately constructs poems whose gaps, seams, and parts are visible and even palpable. This question of lines and of the line in war-time and post-war poetry warrants its own thorough consideration.

**Chapter Five:  
The Line as Limb, & Niedecker & Oppen in the Early 1960s**

It builds meaning by the cut of the fragments and the blaze of white space between parts.  
(Rachel Blau DuPlessis, on Niedecker's "Paean to Place")

[B]ut I like planting poems in deep, silence, each person ~~rea~~ gets at the poems for himself.  
(Niedecker, Letter to Gail and Bonnie Roub)<sup>113</sup>

When Stephen Crane was carefully writing out, in a precise but shaky schoolboy's cursive, the pieces which would later be published as *Black Riders*, he demurred on the ascription of the term "poems": rather, they were merely his "lines" (Colvert 60). We need not take the canny young writer's posture of modesty at face value in order to credit the significance of such a distinction. After all, with unwavering self-assurance, Crane pushed to have his lines published, and, more tellingly, refused to censor his nightmarish vignettes when the publisher threatened to make such modification a non-negotiable condition of publication. Crane's pieces were not quite prose but neither were they recognizably "poems," lacking as they did any of the song-like qualities deemed essential to short poems. Yet Crane knew that the texts were in fact poems at root, *verses*, sentences broken into small stacks of lines and put forth, in print, as discrete objects of attention.

The book's full title is *Black Riders and other lines* (published in 1895, the same year, incidentally, that Stéphane Mallarmé published his typographic touchstone of poetic lineation, *Un Coup de Dés*); and, as textual scholar Jerome McGann relates in his study of "The Visible Language of Modernism," Crane's book "consists of fifty-six short pieces, each roman numbered and each set on a page by itself, and printed (in small capitals) high up on the page so as to leave a notable space below the text" (91). McGann notes that the use of capital letters "as

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<sup>113</sup> This version of the sentence, with the partial word stricken-through, is transcribed from the holograph original (located in the Lorine Niedecker Archive [11,18, 70], which is held at the Hoard Historical Museum and archived online as part of The State of Wisconsin collection).

well as the isolation of each poem on the page, draw one's attention to the poetry's material features, and ultimately to an awareness of poetry *as a system of material signifiers*' (93, author's emphasis). Here, then, is a quintessential instance of proto-small-poetry in America.<sup>114</sup>

Crane's book helps focus the centrality of lines to small poetry. We should note here, too, the inextricable issue of line breaks—the turns or syncopations of “verse”—which are precisely what allow poetic lines to be recognized as such. We have already traced Niedecker's and Oppen's use of lines and line breaks to lend a “compositeness” to many of their poems from the 1930s or '40s, but these poetic practices take on more urgent significance in the long aftermath of the Second World War, through the 1950s and '60s.

It is perhaps not surprising that the most monumental manifesto of post-war American poetry, Charles Olson's 1950 talk, “Projective Verse,” makes spirited reference to lines. The heart of Olson's ideas on the point are found, in his inimitable energetic prose, just after a disquisition on the “smallest” yet most crucial particle, the rudiment, of poetry—the syllable:

...together, these two, the syllable *and* the line, they make a poem...And the line comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes, and thus is, it is here that, the daily work, the WORK, gets in, for only he, the man who writes, can declare, at every moment, the line its metric and its ending—where its breathing, shall come to, termination.

...

The trouble with most work, to my taking, since the breaking away from traditional lines and stanzas, and from such wholes as, say, Chaucer's *Troilus* or

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<sup>114</sup> I say “proto” because the writings do not possess the kind of disjunction fused with realism found in the small objectivist poems of the 1930s.

S's Lear, is: contemporary workers go lazy RIGHT HERE WHERE THE LINE  
IS BORN.

...

Let me put it baldly. The two halves are:

the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE

the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE

And the joker? that it is in the 1st half of the proposition that, in composing, one lets-it-rip; and that it is in the 2nd half, surprise, it is the LINE that's the baby that gets, as the poem is getting made, the attention, the control, that it is right here, in the line, that the shaping takes place, each moment of the going.

...

And the threshing floor of the dance? Is it anything but the LINE?

*(Collected Prose 242, 243)*

These ideas, which owe a great deal, of course, to Ezra Pound and W.C. Williams, among others, galvanized a diverse company of open, “field-based,” exploratory poetics. As I said in the previous chapter, Olson’s poetics—in particular his thinking about the attention warranted by lines—does resonate a great deal with certain small-poetry tendencies, and certainly both Niedecker and Oppen had great respect for Olson. Still, “Projective Verse” does not exactly match up with their work, *their* approach to threshing<sup>115</sup> and shaping lines. There are several significant ways that small poetry stands at a distance or differs from Olson’s approach.

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<sup>115</sup> The word threshing is evocative here, especially for small poems, where larger fields and masses of words are winnowed—rendered down—into small groupings of lines. This trope also brings to mind the rich etymology of “curate,” which entails simultaneously the cutting (or carving) of something as well as attentive care of it.

First, Olson implicitly puts forth form as an organic concept. The oft-quoted dictum from “Projective Verse,” Creeley’s “FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT” (240), implies that content—thought, meaning, image—exerts a particular pressure, from the inside, as it were, that dictates some resultant outward form. As Joseph Conte argues, this links Olson to a Coleridgean, organic principle that asserts the primacy of content over form, that is, the idea that form is produced “*ab intra*,” emerging according to the force and kind of content that is set in motion (30, 28). Michael Hamburger concurs, from a subtly different angle, writing that Olson’s aesthetic is “naturalistic not in the sense of imitating nature, but of wanting art to *be* nature” (284). Small poems, on the other hand, necessarily privilege form over content in that they have chosen smallness. Though they do not operate at an oppositional point, where form (often a set-form) is stamped onto content in an absolute “*ab extra*” fashion, neither do they give language over to its own ever-burgeoning and ever-mutating, “natural” currents.

Writing only small poems, placing spare text after spare text onto discrete pages, is certainly a form of field poetics, but it is an emphatically restricted, measured form. To assemble diminutive line-groupings is to build rooms, not systems, and these hand-made rooms—like all rooms, strictly speaking—are not natural or proliferative; they are less *projected* than arranged, tended, curated (see my note above, on this latter word).

In 1950, the very year of “Projective Verse,” Niedecker posited in a letter (accompanying poems submitted to the *New Mexico Quarterly*) that good poetry is the “outcome of experimentation with subconscious and with folk—all good poetry must contain elements of both or stems from them—plus the rational, organizational force” (qtd. in Penberthy, “Introduction” 7). Tellingly, in Niedecker’s formulation the rational and shaping force of the

mind and hands seems tertiary, or supplementary, to the primary elements of subconscious and folk. These, the wellsprings from which thought and image and word-matter stem, constitute the heart of Niedecker's writing. Yet, even though Niedecker speaks of the "rational, organizational force"—the line-arranging actions of the mind and hands—as the added element in poetic composition, her oeuvre demonstrates that this organizational force is just as inextricably central as the other elements; anyone encountering a book of Niedecker's is likely to be struck most by how brief and how shaped the poems are.

Olson's thinking was and still is incredibly catalyzing with respect to exploratory processes of language-use, but it is not sufficient for accommodating the compressed violence and subtle intimacies of small poems. Olson's essay calls for renovated and renovating modes of poetic production; it promulgates process, openness, the force of breath, the poem in a state of becoming. The flaw of such a program, and it need only be called a potential weakness, is its verboseness, its sprawl. Hamburger cites this as a proclivity in projective verse toward "garrulity," which he aptly if glibly characterizes as "the besetting sin of American verse in the Whitman lineage"; he explains that "the exclusive stress on energy and process does not allow for the quality of what a poem enacts" (286). Indeed, Niedecker and Oppen, despite the affinities they did have for projective and "New American" poetics on the whole, are embodiments of staunch *anti-garrulity*. Oppen's long phase of "poetic silence" and his talk "The Mind's Own Place," in addition to his poetry, attest to this reticence, and Niedecker's view can best be figured by something she wrote of Cid Corman, but which might better apply to her: "he's suspicious as the devil of too many words" ("The Poetry of Cid Corman" 558). It is also worth noting her letters to Clayton Eshleman, where, Rachel Blau DuPlessis tells us, she

“seemed astonished by the projectivist *prolixity* of the works of the 1960s—like Eshleman’s own and Robert Kelly’s” (156, emphasis added).

The situation is of course more complicated: there is no such thing as “projectivist poetry,” really, just as there is no such thing as “Black Mountain Poetry”; Olson’s thinking and his influence were complex and wide-ranging. Robert Creeley presents the most arresting example of how Olson’s ideas might be channeled into smaller, discrete texts—“Little still states,” as Niedecker also said of Corman (another such arresting example). There are still other small-poet cases of this, from anthologized poets like Larry Eigner to nearly forgotten poets like Max Douglas.<sup>116</sup> Nonetheless, insofar as Olson represents a particular mythos or vector, one with a forceful disposition, we must acknowledge that there is at least a tension between that mythos and small-poetry practices of restraint, silence, and the exclusive crafting of texts whose form appears much more enclosed than open.

To return to the question of the line, I want to affirm Olson’s notion of it as the “threshing floor of the dance,” the unit deserving of the poet’s most scrupulous attention, but for the special case of small-poem lines I want to introduce a more provocative figuration—the limb. Every line of text in a free-verse poem is a limb, and the poem entire is not a body but a (headless) pile of limbs. Thus, also, by extension, each whole poem, as a page-isolated text, might be considered one limb articulated as part of a book-shaped pile of other limb-pages. Rae Armantrout’s first technique for effecting poetic silence explicitly asserts this correlation: “She may end *a line or a poem* abruptly, unexpectedly, somehow short of resolution” (34, emphasis added). Each small poem is syncopated in unexpected ways, resulting in line and stanza breaks,

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<sup>116</sup> Douglas, a poet from Kansas who followed the paths cleared by Olson, Ed Dorn, but (more in the vein of Creeley) in the form of rigorously syncopated lines and very small poems, died at the age of twenty-one, in 1970. The one extant volume of his poems, *Max Douglas: Collected Poems*, has long been out of print.

and each poem is liable to end so suddenly and enigmatically that it conveys a mild sense of “syncope,” that is, a temporary loss of consciousness.

‘ ‘ ‘

The German word *glied* means limb; it can also mean member, link, term, or segment. In other words, it is a part which is articulated within a larger whole. The verb *gliedern* means to articulate or to arrange. The extraordinary convergence here of language and the body provide a radical way of looking afresh at small poetry in a post-World War II context, even as the figure of limbs also carries forward deeper-seated modernist strain. No less than Ezra Pound, who, along with William Carlos Williams opened the way for small poems, titled one of his earliest essays “I Gather the Limbs of Osiris” (1912).

All small poems, even those pieces of Niedecker’s composed of quatrains and incorporating rhyme, are really part of a free-verse tradition. “Vers Libre” simply means poetic language written outside of the dictates and justifications of conventional, strict poetic forms or structures. And this outside-ness is most recognizable in how each line is constructed, especially in how it ends or breaks. In set poetic forms, lines end at a prescribed number of syllables and usually at the completion of a phrase or clause; in certain cases, however, the poet may choose to *enjamb* the line, and this practice distills the way lines can start to resolve into limb-like parts.

Enjambment, running a thought past the end of a line so that it gets interrupted, means “straddling” or “stepping over” in its French etymology. This image suggests a body surmounting a small obstacle, someone adjusting to hop over a stone in the path.

In conventional poetics, while such interruptions can create lively suspensions of meaning, they are indeed stepped over, because the poet and reader are moving within an *a priori* structure and known limits. In a sense, these predict and *tame* the event of enjambment. The

allotted number of feet per line run out; perhaps rhyme makes its demands; the poet finishes, that is, fills, the line, holds the thought, and then continues on her rhythmic way.

In the world of free verse, though, outside of set forms, something else happens: the line always *breaks* before its break. There is no given, assured duration, no plotted schema, and so the words are always facing a cutting edge, ready to break and fall below.

Even if a clause does not enjamb, a line on the page can appear partial, fragmentary. In the visual-verbal activity of small poems, then, the enjambed line becomes doubly charged because it cannot necessarily be anticipated. Enjambment becomes here, I want to argue, something fundamentally different. The leg that would step over or across the break is broken, severed; and that line then becomes, again metonymically, the leg itself: the line is *la jambe* (French for “the leg”).

This new troping of enjambment is the pivot on which my larger vision of small poems after World War II turns: enjambed or not, each line is a severed limb, and thus the poem is not a body but a pile of *disembodied* limbs.

The post-war lyric voice can thus (paradoxically) conjure the bewildered but vigilant body more aptly—metonymically—by building knots of uttered pieces, “gliedert,” which are arranged (“gliedern”) on the page by the hands.

The force of line breaks is perhaps most magnified when enjambment is used in a rhyme-less and non-metric free verse form, as in W.C. Williams, but even in poems that are more structured—like many of Niedecker’s stanzas—the sparseness of the small text makes the management of lines as such stand out. The poem’s part-whole tensions are intensified in such a poem; it is a single thing, a pile, and also a gathering of limb-like pieces. The small poet, like Armantrout’s engenderer of poetic silence, creates “extremely tenuous connections between

parts of a poem” (34). Words of course are the most basic such parts, but lines are more important to how small-poetic wholes are grasped on a page: the lines’ length, their position, how many there are, how they break.

In small poems, the radical idea and the visual fact of line breaks is one of the most distinguishing features, evincing both openness and a sense of violence, of “the world or a body carved into parts” (Sikelianos 33). The poet has negotiated an absolute freedom at every moment of composition: deciding when to interrupt each thought, surrender to the white space of the page, break the line, begin again below; and when to end the poem.

And though these prerogatives of writing happen on a page, line breaks and disjunctions in small poems can register a time of violence because they enact a violence toward, or at least a marking of, the voice, which is clipped and syncopated and ultimately given little room to expatiate. Thus also there is an implicit marking of the speaking body that is always metonymically connected to words in the mouth or on the page.

‘ ‘ ‘

Severed limbs of text—“glieder”—are not only articulated—“gliedern”—by the poet but, because they are constituted as they are, they can amount to poems that are themselves uniquely *articulate* about certain experiences and realities. There may be no more clear or forceful account of this than James Scully’s essay “Line Break.” His theory of lines hinges on several tenets, all of them constellated around the axiom that outside of set forms, line breaks function as a form of punctuation:

...line breaks may be expressive. May reflect, refract or shift the angle and distance between the work and the reader. Or telescope meaning. Or render ideologically difficult meaning (more on this later) through the medium of an

accessible or unresisted meaning. Line breaks define energy. They may let the air out, redistribute rhythm, shift the weight of a word, reset our relationship to it. They do this and more. But what's more significant is that the line break is the most volatile, productive punctuation in free verse. It is punctuation that has not been regulated or domesticated. It has not been theorized. (143)

The free-verse line break is the unformulated space we have to maneuver in, to risk production in...It may act, catalyze. It may become a practice. (144)

Line breaks disrupt and defamiliarize not only the dominant conceptions of the reader, say, but the poem's own, hypothetically lineless, "sentenced" discourse. (146)

In sum, the sentence has been broken to release meaning—the suppressed meaning inscribed within the sentence. (158)

Scully's essay captures the vitality of line breaks, the sense of their being "productive" and "catalyzing" precisely because they are "volatile," disruptive, and un-regulated or –domesticated. He also speaks to the sort of realism I have suggested; when he writes of line breaks "reset[ting] our relationship" to a word, Scully is also contending that we might reset our relationship to the world. The essay as a whole elaborates the view that through the employment of certain "techniques" (as distinct from "styles" or "stylistics") like free-verse line breaks, writing can become a "practice," an activity that enables new ways of perception, apprehending, and acting

in the world. The “meaning” he cites that is “inscribed within the sentence,” is understood to be meaning that has actual reference to some reality, that is, to social, political, and embodied facts.

## 1960-62

With the above theory of line breaks in mind, I want to look at several poems from the early 1960s. Moving to this period means taking a rather long step across the 1950s—when Niedecker’s poetics underwent rich development and poets like Creeley and Eigner cultivated Olson’s influence in more lyrical, small-poem ways—but this step helpfully brings us to the “re-surfacing” of George Oppen, the time his second book, *The Materials*, came into being and was published in 1962. He began writing poems again around 1958, when he returned to the United States after several years in Mexico (where he and his family had sought respite from government harassment). Moving to the early ‘60s also brings us to Niedecker’s second official book, *My Friend Tree*, published in 1961.

The early ‘60s is a momentous time to look at line breaks and small poetry in America. The Second World War and Korean War were still recent enough to cast shadows, and Cold War anxieties were pervasive and unabated. This time of war was reflected in a many-limbed experimental American poetry, and 1960 was a sort of sign-post year for this, as it saw the publication of Donald Allen’s massive, epochal post-war anthology *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960*. The poetries collected there, associated especially with so-called New York School, San Francisco Renaissance, and Black Mountain communities, were united in their firm commitment to experimental forms and modes of language. Thus the anthology was expressly

aligned against many of the poetries of the time that enjoyed cultural ascendancy (often through institutional affiliations).<sup>117</sup>

### ***My Friend Tree***

Niedecker's second official book, *My Friend Tree*, was published by Ian Hamilton Finlay's Wild Hawthorn Press (in Scotland) in 1961. Seven new poems were brought together with nine poems reprinted from *New Goose* to make up the quite spare sixteen-poem book. Finlay had discovered *New Goose* that same year and in his enthusiasm contacted Niedecker with an offer to re-publish some of the poems. Though very small and containing a majority of pieces that had already been published, the book is momentous for several reasons: its textual form, the particular seven new poems Niedecker selected for inclusion, and the powerful affirmations of Niedecker's work that the book prompted from certain key New American Poets (a succeeding generation, as it were).

The book itself is practically a booklet. (In fact, if one looks for it in among the holdings of the New York Public Library, one finds it inside a large hardcover volume where it is bound together with a weird assortment of pamphlets and booklets from around the world.) It is about 5 by 7 inches, and staple-bound on the shorter side so that its pages are read horizontally. In keeping with the basic textual approach in *New Goose*, each untitled poem is accorded its own page, though in *My Friend Tree* the poems are not quite floating on blank fields; many of the texts

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<sup>117</sup> As I have indicated several times, small poetry also has tended in the formally experimental direction and away from familiar and sanctioned poetry, even though it also negotiates a degree of separation from the avant-garde. In any case, if we are looking, in the early '60s, for disjunctive poems that evoke piled limbs, or poems that test and twist the basic rudiments of diction or syntax, or poems that implicitly critique a threatening social order, or minimalist, fragment-like poems, we expect to find them at a sharp remove from more urbane, academy-sanctioned traditions of poetry. And this proves out—such poems are found, predominantly, at such a remove—yet by the early '60s there are also some “significant little wrecks” cropping up from more traditional plots of ground, not usually as whole bodies of work but as particular poems here and there. Sylvia Plath's poem “Sheep in Fog,” from *Ariel*, for instance, is a striking example of a small poem.

are accompanied—illuminated in a sense—by austere, semi-figurative linocuts by Walter Miller. Another key difference from *New Goose* involves the economy and parsing of page-space. In *My Friend Tree*, poems and images are only printed on the recto page and all pages are unnumbered. This way of presenting the poems, including the addition of non-verbal forms, harks back to Niedecker's first hand-made book, "Next Year Or I Fly My Rounds, Tempestuous." In both cases the joining of every discrete text to its own piece of paper (nothing on its backside) and the lack of page numbers intensify the sense of the poem as an textual object: each poem-page can be read by itself or in varying sequences of multiple poems; can be torn out, carried around, or placed at some other point in the book.

As for the seven poems that Niedecker interwove among her folk poems, they are most remarkable, as it happens, for their more pronounced use of line breaks and their more intimate tones. In some of the poems, like the one included above, the structure is demonstrably fractured and arranged into parts in ways that most of the earlier folk poems were not. A striking poem from this vein that Niedecker added is this poem, taken from the "For Paul and Other Poems" manuscript:

Paul  
     when the leaves  
         fall  
  
 from their stems  
     that lie thick  
         on the walk  
  
 in the light  
     of the full note

the moon

playing

to leaves

when they leave

the little

thin things

Paul (*CW* 156)

Some of the other new poems are more akin to the earlier Mother Goose poems in structure, but here the forms are more evidently invented and also more complex. Two poems, for instance, employ a version of a five-line stanza Niedecker developed in the '50s and would continue to use throughout her lifetime. The template consists of three lines, sometimes haiku-like as a group, and two more usually shorter lines, with the very brief indented fourth line rhyming with the third. Here is one of the added poems, which is made of two of these stanzas:

You are my friend—

you bring me peaches

and the high bush cranberry

you carry

my fishpole

you water my worms

you patch my boot

with your mending kit

nothing in it

but my hand (189)

At first glance, this poem is not as visually tense as the two above, but the line endings, line placements, and stanza breaks charge the piece with a compelling instability: will the next line start over with another repeated “you” clause or will it continue the current clause? Will a new image or rhyme come into play? Does a certain line pertain to the line that preceded it or the one that follows it? (Line four in this poem, “you carry,” hovers this way.) Of course some of this exciting instability comes from Niedecker’s forfeiting of punctuation and (almost all) capitalization. Like her five-line template, this was a technical development in Niedecker’s writing that she then stuck to through the remainder of her career. It perfectly suits her purposes, functioning as a complement to the candid, direct, declarative, specifying language that animates the new (and old) poems in *My Friend Tree*, and for which Niedecker is so celebrated.

Niedecker’s book is also noteworthy for the significant endorsements that attach to it. First, there is *My Friend Tree*’s preface, written by poet Edward Dorn, who had studied with Olson and Robert Creeley at Black Mountain College in 1954 and ’55. In 1961, Dorn was just on the cusp of what would be a long career as a poet; auspiciously, some of his poems had appeared in Allen’s *The New American Poetry*, and his first book, *The Newly Fallen*, was published (by Amiri Baraka’s Totem Press) in the same year as Niedecker’s book. At age thirty-two, Dorn was only a little more than half Niedecker’s age, making his presence as “introducer” unusual but thrilling (usually the case is reversed, as when Pound wrote the preface for Oppen’s *Discrete Series*)—he might be imagined as the curator of an experimental reading series, stirring up interest and excitement for the older visiting poet, who may be known dimly or not at all by the younger audience.

Indeed, Dorn's preface reads, as Tandy Sturgeon says, like "a highly successful prose poem" inspired by Niedecker's work (*LNWP* 396). It is typed onto one side of a loose piece of paper that is tipped into the front of *My Friend Tree*. Its two paragraphs are preceded by the gnomic yet perspicacious sentence: "These sounds mark the placements of an inner world." He later cites the poems' "notations of an inner world" and admits "I don't 'understand' the poems very well. The 'meanings' are always a little mysterious, to me" (with the scare-quotes, these statements come across as words of praise); yet he then acknowledges that the poems evoke an outer world, too—"So much is said, and heard, portrayals of a landscape with seas and boots, and water, wood, the size is of some kind of nation (people)." On the whole, he is affirming the manner in which Niedecker's brief texts cogently "mark" or "notate" the relations of one person to her environment; they chart the conversion of "inner" and "outer" facts into forms of language. (This is almost an ecological, and certainly a semiotic, activity.) Parts of Dorn's preface, like the first couple of sentences,<sup>118</sup> are somewhat abstruse (though they still ring true somehow), but his final sentence is a succinct tour-de-force in characterizing the sort of challenging, chiseled semiotic realism he sees in Niedecker's writings:

I like these poems because first they attach an undistractable clarity to the word, and then because they are unabashed enough to weld that word to a freely sought, beautifully random instance—that instance being the only thing place and its content can be: the catch in the seine.

Attaching clarity to words, welding words to instances, marking a world—these linguistic actions take on a unique complexity and force in small poems like Niedecker's. Dorn captures this in his final phrase. A "freely sought, beautifully random instance" is a "catch" in a punning double

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<sup>118</sup> "What is in will come out, it does not always work the other way. What there is to be claimed by a common, external, large recognition, is the bony superstructure, the form one might say, but I wouldn't (a too evident form is boring), the word seems the rocks of the whole thing, not pebbles, certainly, phrase, no."

sense—the thing secured by the net and also a *snag*. Small poems themselves are instances in the same way; we handle and face them as we might a quarried bug or scooped pebble, and we also get hung up on them.

The second ringing endorsement of *My Friend Tree* also comes from the Black Mountain camp, but it is found a couple years after the book was published. Robert Creeley's affirmation of Niedecker, in a 1963 *Poetry* magazine omnibus review essay, thus stands as a sort of critical echo of Dorn's preface that completes a bookending *My Friend Tree*. Creeley begins his essay by raising the basic question of how statements are valued. Though we tend to look only for "content," Creeley reminds his readers that "We learn young that the way in which some thing is said, the tone of voice, the literal words used, and all the relations implied in the context of their use,—all these say 'things' too" (42). He then goes on to appraise, in a rapid circuit, no less than nine books of poetry from 1962 (including books by William Stafford, Brother Antoninus, and Charles Bukowski), before arriving at his mention of Niedecker's 1961 book. Along the way, his criticisms and predilections in reference to other poets presage his concluding Niedecker affirmation. In one poet he disapproves of a too-great sense of the melodramatic, "that is, *enlargement* of occasion purely willed" (43, emphasis added). In another poet's work, "[a]pproximations of reality take the place of literal orders, or, more fairly, the reader is given attitudes rather than precise contexts" (48). When he encounters poems that do ring true and vital, he explicitly notes the nature of the discrepancy: "After so much self-consciousness and preening, I like the flatness, the very openness of this language" (47).

These comments correspond to Dorn's lament, in the preface, that "We live in a time of the calculated poem." Creeley's interest is in flat and open language, "literal orders," "precise contexts," indeed, in "reality" that is not merely willed or approximated or stylized:

What are literary ‘manners’ and how can we be rid of them, so that poetry can become again an active investment of all the range of language and all the reality which can be found there? (46)

It is telling that Creeley does not shy away from the word (or the idea of) reality, and that, in effect, this is the value that leads him to give highest praise to Niedecker’s poetry. Creeley’s affirmation of “an active investment of all the range of language and all the reality which can be found there” has nothing to do with accurately “representing” reality in poetry or writing verse that some majority might deem “realistic.” It is not a matter of what can be *proven*, as Creeley’s final comments (below) show. It has to do, rather, with acknowledging that precise contexts and literal orders are challenging but present, that they can be indicated in candid, crafted language.

Creeley’s turn to Niedecker’s book begins with the question “How can such life be told?”—implicitly an inescapable question the poet should always acknowledge and grapple with—and then he answers it by citing Dorn’s remark on Niedecker that “What is in will come out, it does not always work the other way” and the last sentence of the preface (concerning attaching clarity to word and welding those words to instances). Creeley then abruptly ends his essay with a simple but staunch vote for *My Friend Tree*: “I cannot believe there is anything, finally, to be proven. All we see, we see. By nature, then, and of course unfairly, I will stick with Miss Niedecker” (48). Actually, at the very end of the essay, following his declaration of allegiance, he quotes one of Niedecker’s poems:

Remember my little granite pail?  
The handle of it was blue.  
Think what’s got away in my life!  
Was enough to carry me thru. (48)

This is one of the poems reprinted from *New Goose*. Thus, intentionally or not, Creeley lays down a poem from the early 1940s as a trump card in a consideration of early '60s poetry! He even uses a portion of one of the lines—"Think what's got away"—as the title of his whole review essay. Perhaps even more remarkable than the defiant anachronism is the fact that in "sticking with" Niedecker, Creeley chooses the only woman under consideration for greatest praise. It is true that Creeley would have already had a certain partiality to Niedecker's objectivist-indebted poetics, thus some investment in preferring her. But his review still makes a bold and contentious statement: in a veritable battle royale of nine contemporary male poets, played out in *Poetry* magazine's high-profile forum, Creeley declares the winner to be a sixty-year-old woman who lives in a small Wisconsin town, writes small poems, and barely has two books published.

Together, the words of Dorn and Creeley show that there is a meaningful way to take exception to certain prevailing contemporary trends of post-war poetics (like a more amplificatory Olsonian mode) without being at odds with their principles; and they argue vigorously for the continued vitality, the relevance, of small poems—even "out of date" ones—in post-war America.

**"[A] poem that shows confidence in itself and in its materials..."**

The subject heading above comes from George Oppen's essay "The Mind's Own Place," his one published statement of poetics, which appeared in 1962, the same year as his monumental second book of poems, *The Materials*. The line occurs just after Oppen's famous assertion that the data of experience "was and is the core of what 'modernism' restored to poetry, the sense of the poet's self among things" (*SP* 175). A poem that registers such data and

such a sense, and that shows confidence in itself and its materials, Oppen claims, is sharply discrepant from a poem that is merely “a performance,” which belongs not to poetry but “histrionics” (176). These convictions accord with those voiced by Dorn and Creeley above, in reference to Niedecker’s poetry. Oppen, too, does not hesitate to speak candidly in favor of poetry’s accountability to reality and against forms of poetry that are corrupted because they are overly “calculated” (Dorn), or “mannered” and “enlarged” (Creeley), that is, “inflated” (Oppen 173), performative, histrionic. Oppen, though he is himself part of an experimental tradition, speaks scathingly in his essay of “a furious and bitter Bohemia,” whose spirited and open-ended innovations are merely “an onanism which they believe to be artistic” (173).<sup>119</sup> (This critique and general asceticism is often forgotten or cannily avoided by those would simply embrace Oppen as one more happy member of a unified American avant-garde tribe.)

Oppen’s comments about reality are especially noteworthy for their candor and pragmatic penetration:

There comes a time in any such discussion as this when the effort to avoid the word *reality* becomes too great a tax on the writer’s agility. The word of course has long since ceased to mean anything recognizably “real” at all, but English does seem to be stuck with it. We cannot assert the poet’s relation to reality, nor exhort him to face reality, nor do any of these desirable things, nor be sure that

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<sup>119</sup> Here, for context, is the entire passage:

Modern American poetry begins with the determination to find the image, the thing encountered, the thing seen each day whose meaning has become the meaning and the color of our lives. Verse, which had become a rhetoric of exaggeration, of inflation, was to the modernists a skill of accuracy, of precision, a test of truth. Such an art has always to be defended against a furious and bitter Bohemia whose passion it is to assist, in the highest of high spirits, at the razing of that art which is the last intrusion on an onanism which they believe to be artistic. In these circles is elaborated a mock-admiration of the artist as a sort of super-annuated infant, and it is the nightmare of the poet or the artist to find himself wandering between the grim gray lines of the Philistines and the ramshackle emplacements of Bohemia. (*SP* 173)

we are not insisting merely that he discuss only those things we are accustomed to talk about, unless we somehow manage to restore a meaning to the word.

(174)

Later, alluding to a poem of Denise Levertov, he extols

verse which means only to be clear, to be honest, to produce *the realization of reality* and to construct a form out of no desire for the trick of gracefulness, but in order to make it possible to grasp, to hold the insight which is the content of the poem.

(176, emphasis added)

Again, Oppen does not believe there is a hidden, true “meaning” that already exists for the word “reality”; rather, he thinks of “restoring meaning” to the word as a task, one that must be continually undertaken so that poets will still have some meaningful sense of being accountable to the world. Thus the poem is not some reliable, solid depiction of what exists but a graph, a record of human thought and encounter: “it is an account of the poet’s perception, the act of perception; it is a test of sincerity, a test of conviction” (175). These are touchy, complicated ideas, but Oppen speaks of them plainly and fervently, and he also ventures the task directly, in the realm of poetry itself—welding words to instances just as “unabashedly” as Niedecker does (even if those instances do not seem as “freely sought” as hers).

The thinking articulated in “The Mind’s Own Place” is borne out in the poems Oppen published that same year. Some of them (or it may be better to say that certain elements in all of them) resemble *Discrete Series*, but generally *The Materials* shows Oppen in more expressive and varied modes, commingling personal utterances and world-indexing phrases in poems that tend to be a good bit longer than those in his first book. Some of the pieces spill onto a second page, and there are several multi-page sequences with numbered sections (new types of discrete series

which anticipate Oppen's most famous poem, 1968's *Of Being Numerous*), but for the most part the poems are still emphatically small—in both scale and kind—and the book still hews roughly to a small-poetry book template of texts housed on single pages.

The tenor of *The Materials* is probably best captured by this couplet from the first poem in the book, "Eclogue," which seems to allude to the first poem in *Discrete Series*: "Beyond the window / Flesh and rock and hunger" (lines 8-9, 39). Or, alternately, we might look to the book's epigraph, from the French philosopher Jacques Maritain: "We awake in the same moment to ourselves and to things" (*NCP* 38). The book is full of references to things, especially elemental things like rocks, leaves, air, water, sun, soil, parts, light, hills. The book is also full of scenes, reminiscences, and statements, even exclamations. Either of these groups, or even both of them together, might be considered "the materials" of the title, but I would like to propose another candidate. The title might best be understood, for Oppen, as just a designation for written words themselves—especially small, simple words that indicate or shift a direction of thought—pieces of writing that can be physically arranged to create structures, "forms," as Oppen wrote, that might "make it possible to grasp" some kind of "insight" ("Mind's Own," 176).

The forms here vary, as did the forms in *Discrete Series*; but all of them are built around salient disjunctions of both sense and visual form. Line breaks are especially prominent in *The Materials*, not only because nearly all of them are enjambed, but because Oppen chose to begin every new line with a capital letter, creating a more forceful sense of interruption. Also as in *Discrete Series*, these poems feature a host of conspicuous prepositions, pronouns, articles, and deictic pointers (like "there"), many of them recurring several times in a poem. In spite of the similarities in structure, poems in *The Materials* convey much more poignancy and urgency than

Oppen's poems of the 1930s. "Resort," which begins in one place and mood and then ends, after a series of jarring shifts, somewhere else entirely:

There's a volcano snow-capped in the air some twenty miles  
from here

In clear lit air,

There is a tree in leaf here—

In my dream an old man walking,

An old man's rounded head

Abruptly mine

Self-involved, strange, alien,

The familiar flesh

Walking. I saw his neck, his cheek

And called, called:

Called several times. (44)

Like all of the book's poems, this one feels halting and deliberate. It is a spare poetry, conveying a distinctly post-World War II sense of tension, a latent urgency to make sense of things. Even poems that don't contain the personal elements found in "Resort" do this. "Debt" begins with these seven tense, collaged lines:

That 'part

Of consciousness

That works':

A virtue, then, a skill  
Of benches and the shock

Of the press where an instant on the steel bed  
The manufactured part— (60)

So much seems to be elided in these lines; some relation between the human “part” and the mechanically constructed “part” is insinuated but not clarified. The poem further considers the manufactured piece in its new but imperfect state but then ends, like the poem above, on a somber, deflated note: the made part—as well as, implicitly, the “part / Of consciousness / That works” or even a particular person *as* a part—exists merely “Among the pin ups, notices, conversion charts, / And skills, so little said of it” (60).

In “Resort,” parts of a body rupture into view—a head, neck, and cheek—whereas “Debt” rattles with “the shock / Of the press,” “the steel bed,” the strange “skill / Of benches,” and “pin ups.” In both poems, though, for the reader, the prime materials to be negotiated are the paratactically assembled phrases and lines. *The Materials* is a certainly a poetry of piled limbs, and the pieces in the book that best suggest this trope are those constructed primarily or solely in two-line stanzas. “Ozymandias” affords a striking example:

The five  
Senses gone

To the one sense,  
The sense of prominence

Produce an art  
*De luxe.*

And down town  
The absurd stone trimming of the building tops

Rectangular in dawn, the shopper's  
Thin morning monument. (59)

The first four lines are almost inscrutably abstract, except for the idea of empirical attention collapsing in favor of some spectacle. The thrice-repeated “sense” and the odd rhyme of “prominence,” however, create some momentum. This flow is interrupted at “Produce an art / *De luxe*,” though, because the verb does not agree with the two singular nouns preceding it; it may even be read as a new thought, a command: “*Produce...*” The final four lines suddenly sketch out an urban scene and a lone figure, recalling, again, some of Oppen’s earlier poems. The open disparagement of casting the stone trimming as “absurd,” though, is a newer, post-war move, as is the way this line of text suddenly and awkwardly juts out into the page-space, well beyond the range established by the poem’s prior lines. Oppen’s textual materials, his limb-lines of writing, frequently achieve this tension: to look at and read them on a page is to find ordered lines—beginning at the left margin, capitalized, and perhaps grouped into regular stanzas—whose evenness is cross-cut by one or more forms of *ungainliness* (a line that seems too short or too long; verbs that don’t agree with nouns; an unfathomable gap between two stanzas).

The ending of “Ozymandias,” too, is typical of many poems in *The Materials* because it focuses on something static, hard, and durable and also because it presents something in terms of frailty or diminution. The word “thin” is used in several other poems in the book, in reference to a foot in one place, to a “radiance” in another. And, auspiciously for the present study, the word “small” occurs at least eight times in the book, often at or near the end of a poem. Oppen’s use of such descriptors, and his chronic attention to rock, stones, and inanimate

objects generally, reflects his deep interest in how human beings (small and frail as they are) endure among—that is, in relation to—things, small or large, that endure much better and much longer than we do. Oppen’s texts have a tone that is contemplative but also urgent, ethical. If many poems end, like the ones cited above, with a sort of bare image, others end on a object-less human plane—equally bare, but direct, confrontational, even prayerful. The last poem in the book, “Leviathan,” declares “What is inexplicable / Is the ‘preponderance of objects’” (lines 10-11, 89), but the poem ends with this stanza:

We must talk now. Fear

Is fear. But we abandon one another. (89)

‘ ‘ ‘

George Oppen’s writing flourished in the years the followed *The Materials*. He accumulated an incredible range of writings in palpably constructed notebooks or sheaves that he called “Daybooks,” and he published many more books of poetry, the most celebrated of which was *Of Being Numerous*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1969. Throughout, Oppen continued to write many small, single-page poems, though these became outnumbered by longer pieces that stretched across several pages. On the other hand, at the level of the phrase or the line, his writing stayed tenaciously “small,” that is, fragmentary and precise. His late books from the 1970s are the most enigmatically “damaged,” the most “significantly wrecked” of his oeuvre. Still, with the 1962 “return to poetry”—when, after a twenty-eight year gap, and right in the thick of post-war poetry jockeying, Oppen again presented a book of predominantly single-page poems and also articulated his position in “The Mind’s Own Place”—constitutes the crux of his career and a pivotal moment in twentieth-century small poetry.

### *Homemade (Handmade) Poems*

The publication of *My Friend Tree* in 1961 was a great success for Niedecker, but it gave only the tiniest glimpse—those seven new poems that were intermingled with the poems from *New Goose*—into the poetry she had been writing since 1946, the effective end of her folk-poetry project. In the 1950s, she was taken up with the expansive *For Paul and Other Poems*, whose pieces ran a gamut of forms and tones and lengths. During the same period, and increasingly in the late '50s, Niedecker was also writing a host of notably small, spare poems—the bulk of them a single five-line stanza, the new form she had developed. A few of these found their way into *My Friend Tree*, but most of them accumulated outside of book and publication imperatives. These pieces do not constitute any particular project, but instead give the impression of discrete writings keyed to Niedecker's everyday life.

She continued to write these often tiny poems through the early 1960s. Though some of them were published here and there, Niedecker had no official book prospect that might house the poems. Thus, much as she had done thirty years prior in 1934, she took action and assembled a book of her own. In the fall of 1964, Niedecker put together a handmade book of thirty poems culled from the past year, each one handwritten on its own page. She sent the book to Cid Corman, who was living in Japan, with the title *Homemade Poems* inscribed on the book's cover.<sup>120</sup> Only a few months later, she constructed two more renditions of the book—containing nearly the same poems and sequence—which she sent to, respectively, Louis Zukofsky and Jonathan Williams. The title of these latter two books was gently tweaked to *Handmade Poems*. Altogether, then, “Homemade/Handmade Poems” (as the section is titled in

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<sup>120</sup> This first “edition” of the book, *Homemade Poems*, is currently held in the Berg Collection of English and American Literature at the New York Public Library, where I had the privilege of examining it.

Niedecker's *Collected Works*) denotes a self-published book in an edition of three, with minor variations from one iteration to the next.

Throughout her life, Niedecker made gift-books for various friends and family members, but this production stands apart. Given the meticulousness of the construction, the multiple editions, and the chosen recipients (all influential editor/critic-poets), it amounts to a true publication, even though it has not been regarded this way. In fact, of all Niedecker's books, *Homemade/Handmade Poems* presents the most cohesive, forceful synthesis of her most salient poetic traits. The thirty small poems move through a range of shapes and references and tones; they are evocative without being sentimental; the relatively plain language is chiseled and broken into composite wholes that tilt in elliptical directions; and all of these features together—in particular the paradoxical sense of an intimate violence infusing each discrete (severed) line and poem—are enhanced immeasurably by the material form of the book itself, with its hand-inscribed pages, its planting of each text on its own unnumbered page, and its unabashed, quotidian-espousing title.

The first rendition of the book, especially—*Homemade Poems*, sent to Corman—might be justly considered a concrete, codex-shaped *ars poetica* for small poetry form and practice, a book whose language as well as design, materiality, and self-designation carry an implicit argument about what poetry is, that is, how non-discursive language might best be embodied for the hands and mind of a reader. Certainly I am not claiming that *Homemade Poems* is Niedecker's "greatest" work, or even that it should be considered apart from its rather private context, as if such a gift-book were the same as any other book or manuscript. But *Homemade Poems* is a book, a work that knows exactly what it is about; it is a perfect, potent distillation of the scale, techniques, textual principles, practices, and tenor that pervade all of Niedecker's work. It demonstrates

how page and book can work in tandem to feature language that is meaningfully “minced” in a time of war: limb-like lines, semiotic textual sites that attest to reality itself even as they enact “constructive dissociation” (Riding 114) from constraining, illusory versions of it that are imposed in a given cultural moment.

Of course, the chief tension that attaches to this work is the one Niedecker wryly embraces in her title. A handwritten, handmade book of poems calling itself “Homemade” risks being neglected or even denigrated as quaint domestic craft-work. At best such a thing might be celebrated (in a way that relegates it to less serious realms of artwork) as a thorny but charming curiosity. Niedecker dealt with these perceptions throughout her career, but in *Homemade Poems* she takes them on in a direct and extraordinary manner. As Elizabeth Willis notes, in the first sentence of her essay “Who Was Lorine Niedecker?,” “It’s hard to write about Lorine Niedecker without using the terms that have, in part, kept her in critical obscurity.” Niedecker, knowing this too well, “takes on” these terms in both senses, unsettling and upending them even as she embraces them in her own refigured ways. If, as Willis writes, all of Niedecker’s poems tend to be both “proud of themselves and subtly self-mocking, consciously combining high modernist and homespun aesthetics,” then *Homemade Poems* is the work where these postures and techniques are quintessentially concentrated.

### **The Book**

The cover, front and back, is thin cardboard enveloped in greenish-bronze wrapping paper with gold doily-snowflakes. There are two small rectangular pieces pasted horizontally onto the front, the white innermost one bearing the title, “Homemade / Poems”; under this

Niedecker has written her name. These lines, like those of the poems inside the book, are in blue ballpoint ink.

When the cover is opened, by means of the binding at left, one finds a watercolor painting of Niedecker's new home (she had recently married a man named Al Millen and moved into a larger house that was built next to her small cabin), a one-page letter to Corman, and then the poems, all of these arranged to be read vertically so that one must rotate the book ninety degrees clockwise. This sort of conflation of the mischievous and the pragmatic is perfectly characteristic of Niedecker's writing.

The poems themselves vary in form and length but each of them is inscribed onto its own vertically stretched plane, in fact its own sheet of paper, as there is no writing on the back of the pages. The paper in the former drawing pad is thin, somewhat translucent, and linen-textured.

The sense of each poem as a discrete object is made even more acute by Niedecker's refusal to number any of the pages and by her vivid, blue-inked handwriting, a confident, plain, but not over-precise cursive script.<sup>121</sup>

### **“I knew a clean man / but he was not for me”**

The poems in the book, small though they are, cover enormous ground and evince myriad inflections. Some, like the first one, leap into speculative fancy, meshing similar vowels

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<sup>121</sup> I might add here that “the book” is actually, at present, a pile of loose sheets inside a cover. Presumably, the sketchpad-like notebook Niedecker used had at the top a minimal glue binding, which deteriorated over time. The merest strip of blue marks the top edge of each page, attesting to some such former binding. Likewise, the front and back cover are barely holding on, partly with the help of the worn wrapping paper. The book in its present state is thus fragile, delicate of frame, though it has a matter-of-fact fortitude, enduring quite well, considering.

and consonants together and marrying abstract worlds to sensuous ones (but coming down firmly on the side of the latter):

Consider at the outset:  
to be thin for thought  
or thick cream blossomy

Many things are better  
flavored with bacon

Sweet Life, My love:  
didn't you ever try  
this delicacy—the marrow  
in the bone?

And don't be afraid  
to pour wine over cabbage (*CW* 200)

The poem reads like a longer version of one of the 1934 “Next Year” poems, intimate in its address but bursting with hearty, palpable *things*. As its first line indicates, with a textual wink, we can read this poem almost as an epigraph or a proem for the book to follow.

Other pieces in *Homemade Poems* are provocatively tiny and trace a single, evocative curve:

	<i>March</i>
Ah your face	Bird feeder's
but it's whether	snow-cap
you can keep me warm (200)	sliding
	off (202)

Both of these poems are somewhat haiku-like in form, but the first is unabashedly intimate and interpersonal where the second etches its human-free image onto the page graphically and intimates a change of seasons. Though both poems consist of a single speech-act or thread of language, each is complicated and enriched by line breaks. “Ah your face” conjures erotic tenderness in a mere three syllables, only to interrupt or revoke it with “but it’s whether,” whose pronoun is all the more freighted for having no antecedent. The last line—extended to five syllables after the first and second lines of three and four syllables, respectively—returns to an image of deep intimacy, body against body, but it also suggests a broader and more difficult concept of warmth: livelihood, subsistence. And, in a characteristically deft move, Niedecker creates a retroactive pun around “whether”—when the speaker finally invokes warmth, the word just above it (linked cognitively through beginning letter, too) resonates also as “weather,” with “it’s” working also as “its.” The addressee’s face seems to have its own climate—“its weather”—which may or may not be capable of keeping the speaker warm. The second poem, bearing the kind of indented quasi-title that Niedecker sometimes attached at the top right edge of a poem, uses lineation to step or slide the eye, thus the mind, down and over, mimicking the event described in the poem. However, the event isn’t disclosed until the poem ends. The reader pieces one brief line to the next as she moves through the poem—here as each new line strays right it also gets successively smaller, like melting snow—accumulating the image and, finally, the implication (prompted by the title) that the sliding snow-cap heralds the imminence of Spring, thus the return of birds to the bird feeder. This poem presents an ultra-condensed example of something Niedecker voiced all the way back in 1934, in a letter, arranging words expressly with a view to “readers finding sequence for themselves” (*CW* 370).

Some of the other smallest poems in the book also stay rigorously trained on the natural world but do so more enigmatically, and in declarative forms of speech. The following koan-like poem begins to elaborate a plain, direct clause, but then loops back on itself—like a botanical ouroboros. It disintegrates or rather distills into single, floating thing-words, repeated from lines one and two. The rhyming and repeating sounds have a lulling effect, and those two floating words are even more starkly present to the reader for the prospect of their being devoured.

Something in the water  
like a flower  
will devour

water

flower (202)

Another poem in this vein—especially small texts made of simple, declarative language—performs a very different kind of unfolding. It begins in a voice of straight-faced industrious Americanism but then turns inside out, becoming a transcendental proverb:

For best work  
you ought to put forth  
    some effort  
    to stand  
in north woods  
among birch (210)

Of course not all of the *Homemade Poems* are love poems or encounters with the natural world. Some merely chart a mundane but definite action in precise language:

*Hospital Kitchen*

Return  
the night women's  
gravy  
  
to the cleaned  
stove (205)

Even a poem like this is not simple, however; as always, Niedecker fractures her phrases to create suspensions and ambiguities. Lacking a subject, the reader has to infer the grammatical sense of “Return” and the referential meaning of “night women’s” and “gravy,” not to mention some more fleshed-out context entire. Niedecker also uses the stanza break to draw out a tension around cleanliness. The “cleaned / stove” revealed at the end seems less clean or no longer clean, now that gravy has been returned to it.

By turns the poems run from vivid minutiae, as in the above piece, to world news, abstracted sound-mosaics, and spare “portraits” (in the first or third person) of friends and historical figures. *Homemade Poems* includes pieces citing Ian Hamilton Finlay, Louis Zukofsky, Mary Shelley, John Ruskin, and George Santayana. Here is one of the briefest and starkest of such poems:

*Margaret Fuller*

She carried books  
and chrysanthemums  
to Boston

into a cold storm (205)

To see the span of Niedecker’s ever-ranging poetics, we need only look to another, very different poem that also considers the intricacies of the floral meshed with the intellectual:

*Chicory flower*

*on campus*

Open-field  
 blue-wheeled  
     gone by hot noon  
  
 to revolve  
     earth-evolved  
         mind-city (206)

This poem is of the “sound-mosaic” category, and the acute exploiting of dense sonic texture demonstrated here—in this case rendered in the form of condensed hyphenated branches, piled on top of and echoing off each other (reminiscent of Gerard Manley Hopkins, a poet Niedecker admired)—is part of a streak running throughout *Homemade Poems*. Sometimes the language of such a poem takes form in an especially broken way, severely syncopated on the page and in the mouth:

*Scythe*

Spite  
     spit  
 loud  
     sound  
 where is my scy?'

Why  
 by your nose—  
     so close  
     a snake  
 would've bit (209)

Even in the above poem, laconic and stuttering as it is, Niedecker assembles the limb-lines into versions of her five-line stanza form. In “Scythe,” this arrangement of broken language acts as a vehicle for presenting folk speech and two evocative omens of danger or injury (which happen to be metonymically related—a scythe might actually discover, even kill, a snake in mown grass). Elsewhere the same vehicle and the same stuttering, sound-driven language are employed to completely divergent ends, poignantly familial and personal ones:

*I visit  
 the graves*

Greatgrandfather  
 under wild flowers sons  
 sons here now I  
     eye  
 of us all

but sonless  
 see no  
     hop  
 clover boy to stop  
 before me (210)

‘ ‘ ‘

The “homemade” poems in Niedecker’s book are anything but charming handicrafts or domestic trinkets. They are devoted not to seeking order, tidiness, or cleanliness—one of the poems announces, like a motto, “I knew a clean man / but he was not for me”—but to alertness to all dimensions of an untidy reality. *Homemade Poems* does not show a poet *retreating* into a domestic bunker but one who uses home as a base from which boldly and vigilantly to attend to events, gestures, disturbances, names, and possibilities in the world. Her hand-written texts record and also, in a sense, create these things. The world the poems attest to is small and richly textured, but also enormous and planar; the time is one of wit and captivating flora and fauna, but also a time of war. Some of the poems bring these disparate realities together in only a few dense, haunting lines:

The radio talk this morning  
was of obliterating  
the world

I notice fruit flies rise  
from the rind  
of the recommended  
melon<sup>122</sup>

If that poem juxtaposes global catastrophe with mundane fact, the latter becoming a *memento mori* emblem, another poem that explicitly cites violence shows these realities *entangled*:

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<sup>122</sup> This is the version of the poem found in *Homemade Poems*. The version that appears in the main section of Niedecker’s *Collected Works* is one she revised for *Handmade Poems*.

Spring  
 stood there  
 all body

Head  
 blown off  
 (war)

showed up  
 downstream

October  
 is the head  
 of spring

Birch, sumac  
 before  
 the blast (211)

The poem commingles the human world, dis severed by war, and the natural world, partitioned by its seasons and subject also to human violence. The worlds are mutually and actually implicated, not metaphorically related; and the bodies explicitly mentioned in the poem are figured by the broken, stacked, and hand-written lines of the poem.

Peter Nicholls writes that even though Niedecker is often “read as the epitome of a small-scale, ‘homely’ poet,” this view fails to acknowledge that in her later work she “was in fact significantly influenced by her encounter with French poets” (Nicholls, “Modernising Modernism” 2). Nicholls characterizes this influence as a form of “abstractionism” (2), and late in her career Niedecker herself spoke of incorporating a “reflective” element in her poems.

Certainly these dimensions are evident in the poems above—they arise from the shifts, elisions, and ambiguities at the level of word and line—but these techniques are not the sole counterargument against Niedecker being considered “homely,” nor are they even opposed in any way to the small scale and the home-based. In fact, *Homemade Poems* synthesizes and highlights something that is at the heart of all Niedecker’s writing, an allegiance to the immediacies of one’s place and to the tiniest nuances of a daily experience.

She *is* actually the epitome of the small-scale and home-based (certainly not “homely”) poet, because of how radically and continually her writing re-imagines these conceptions. Home is the site from and through which one is connected to everything else in the world, or, to view it from another angle, the place at which the world ultimately impinges on each of us. It is not at all a diminutive, static, or lesser realm. And thus things that are made or dealt with at home, by and for the hands, are uniquely complex: improvised, expressive, portable, socially shared, keyed to everyday facts and encounters, freighted with significance. Niedecker’s devotions to home and to “folk” and to experimental small poetry are inextricable from each other.

As Elizabeth Willis succinctly puts it, Niedecker emphatically evinces “the perseverance of a poet who would not be separated from her cultural and aesthetic sources” (“Who Was”). Willis goes further, illuminating what lies at the heart of Niedecker’s aloof, reserved disposition:

Her perceived humility seems to stem less from midwestern decorum than from the modern acknowledgment that we live and work in a reality as much evolutionary as creationist, where the poem is a fossil-like record of both individual genius and the pressures of the various histories into which we are born. (“Who Was”)

In other words there is indeed a kind of humility in Niedecker, a disposition exemplified in *Homemade Poems*, but it is not diffidence or manners or even meekness; instead it is an active, alert, investigative, confident humility. Announcing one's poems as homemade or handmade may sound "self-mocking," but it is only wryly and "subtly" so (to quote Elizabeth Willis); the poems are still manifestly "proud of themselves," too, firmly aware of the "high modernist" lineage to which they belong (Willis, "Who Was").

*Homemade Poems*, then, is not presented merely to amuse and titillate; it is not some charming little thing proffered quietly out of Niedecker's private domestic sphere. Quite to the contrary, *Homemade Poems* is a forceful instance of her bold disruption of quaintness. It disrupts common, patronizing notions of the home- and hand-made in order to refigure them in textual space and poetic form. The book is the most excellent example we have of how Niedecker subverts expectations about small craftworks yet holds firmly to the scales and pleasures and materials of a domestic economy and a quotidian metaphysics. It shows us how, in a sense, she transcends "short" poetry and the homemade by burrowing deeper into these modes, becoming curiously and multifariously and tenaciously *small*.

‘       ‘       ‘

In *Homemade Poems*, the lines, the voices, of the texts are parsed but there is no trace of parsimony.

Each text seems punctually in place, and effects a kind of puncture for the reader, but there is nothing punctilious about the parsed lines and small scale.

Niedecker's poems are works of wide-ranging witness, yet she somehow infuses them with wit, too—canny intelligence and wise humor.

As they are presented in *Homemade Poems*, Lorine Niedecker's small handwritten poems exhibit a creaturely *tenacity*. They hold their places, and enact their meanings with nervy self-assurance. Instead, we might call this tenacity botanical: the poems are lichen-like, strikingly colored life-forms clinging stalwartly to a rock-face.

The poems here matter-of-factly betray effort, the actual work entailed in moving around in, subsisting in, observing and notating the physical world and one's responsive place in it. Yet the poems, especially in their handwritten form, feel easy-going, too, *effortless*, free of any strain toward extended verbiage or ornate "expression" and readily available to the reader's hands, eyes, and mind.

A sense of quotidian and poetic labor saturates *Homemade Poems*, but they are a bracing antidote, a precise counter, to any and all *belaboring*.

**"A poem to a page—nice." / "[E]ach person rea-gets at the poem for himself"**

*Homemade Poems* can be seen as an *ars poetica* because it exemplifies Niedecker's distinctive approach to place and to language in such a cohesive material, textual form. I have thus far focused on the title itself and the decision to write the poems by hand. These infuse the whole book with a vital intimacy and a sense of fragility. But the most important aspect of the book's form is the way Niedecker presents her texts on page-space. This textual deployment is the central way her poems achieve their powerful network of effects. For Niedecker, each page is a site curated so that some reader might have a definite and heightened encounter with broken, arranged writing. Niedecker herself as well as numerous critics speak to this issue of page-use, in other words the intensely phanopoetic aspect of her poetry.

From her earliest phase of writing poems, Niedecker was conscientious about their status in printed form, the effect of words' simultaneity on the page (*CW* 370). Later in her career, she

became more assured and more eloquent about such matters, articulating a notion of the small, page-based text as a near-sacred means of encountering language.<sup>123</sup> Somewhat paradoxically—given how sound-driven her poems are and how candidly they incorporate elements of violence—*silence* figures prominently in Niedecker’s views. In a May 1967 letter to Cid Corman, discussing “poems read aloud” versus “poems printed,” she enunciates a pithy, provisional stance: “Poems are for one person to another, spoken thus, or read silently” (*BYM* 121). Because she is concerned most with the intimacy not of interpersonal relationships but the arresting, estranging intimacy of aesthetic space, Niedecker is wary of the way a public setting deflates and disrupts this space. She writes of being “aware of not simply audience but mixed and nerve-crossed audience, of somewhat inattentive audience” (121), and she suggests a telling way this situation might be mitigated: “If the silence could be governed among the people, if your voice came from somewhere not seen, i.e., radio, or out of suffused light—perhaps OK” (121).

Niedecker’s own position is unambiguous, though. “If I close my eyes I look for the words on the page,” she writes; and her rumination concludes with this partisan declaration—“If your ear is acute you sound your poem in silence” (121)—a maxim for all poetics of the defiantly minimal and small. Her poems develop, by her own account, as collections of *lines*: “I think lines of poetry I might use—all day long and even in the night” (*CW* 10). Perhaps Niedecker’s most memorable articulation of her page-oriented poetics is the one found in her November 1970 letter to her friends Gail and Bonnie Roub. She wrote the letter just after a

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<sup>123</sup> Her thoughts on the subject took shape mostly in letters to Cid Corman, in reference to several requests for her to read her poems aloud. In the late ‘60s, Jonathan Williams and Bob Nero both asked to record her reading poems. She kindly but firmly refused them both; when reporting the first refusal to Corman, Niedecker noted flatly and with a tinge of pride, “I’ve never read aloud” (*BYM* 119). In the end, when Corman himself visited Black Hawk Island in 1970, just before Niedecker’s death, she did consent to being recorded. The seventeen-minute tape was preserved and a digital version is now readily available, much as this might appall Niedecker herself.

visit from Cid Corman and his wife and just weeks before suffering the aneurysm that would take her life. While in Black Hawk Island, Corman had managed to persuade Niedecker to read a few poems into a tape recorder, and, unhappy with the results—her sense that the poems didn't translate properly into that medium—reflects once more on her commitments to writing as such. “I think a person conscious of a listening audience would write just a little bit differently from the way he would for print,” she says, clearly locating herself in the latter category. Niedecker acknowledges that certain poems with “fairly obvious music” may work aloud, but that for her part:

I like planting poems in deep, silence, each person gets at the poems for *himself*.

He has to come to the poems with an ear for all the music they can give and he'll

hear that as Beethoven heard tho deaf. (241-43, author's emphasis)<sup>124</sup>

The idea of “planting” poems and that of “getting at” them are eminently tangible ones, connoting physical pages, poems as things, and the hands that write on and hold those pages in meditative silence; yet this approach aims for *music*, something utterly intangible (though as sound it is still material) and un-silent. This paradox is typical of Niedecker's art: she uses sculpted and visual texts as means of silently conveying a sort of internally registered music, a music of thought, feeling, and association. (And obviously, the most effective way to facilitate this poetics textually is by “planting” individual texts in the silence of their own page-fields. As Niedecker simply but aptly puts it, in reference to some poems of Jean Daive she had recently read, “A poem to a page—nice” [BYM 185].)

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<sup>124</sup> Niedecker reiterates these thoughts, in paraphrased form, in a letter she wrote to British critic Kenneth Cox around the same time:

I got to thinking as I read how one can write for print and it means one thing and let it out of the mouth and into a listener to become something else...For me poetry is a matter of planting it in deep, a filled silence, each person reading it a silence to be filled—he'll have to come to the poems—both writer and reader—with an ear for all the poems can give and he'll hear that as Beethoven heard tho deaf. (in Dent, *Full Note* 41)

The colloquial phrase “gets at” here is remarkably precise in communicating Niedecker’s conception. Tellingly, the holograph manuscript of this letter shows that she first wrote “rea”—presumably intending to write “reads”—and then struck through it with a line, choosing “gets at” instead. If a poem has been planted “in deep,” in “silence,” a person finding it will not merely “read” it but must *get at* it—grasp it, encounter it fully, engage it multiple times over, inquire of it, weigh it, savor it.

(In so doing, the reader might “realize” the poem; it has a chance of being realized for her, of taking form as a significant thing. Thus, we might imagine that the stricken, incompleting letters “~~rea~~,” sitting next to “gets at,” gesture not only to “read” but to this much deeper idea as well.)

Such giving and receiving is facilitated by pages and hands, which are the actual spaces that both accommodate and fill silence. Like Susan Howe after her, Niedecker aspires to an aural poetry that emanates from the written page, but that doesn’t require an “oral means of creating it,” as Peter Middleton argues (210).

Again, Niedecker is not here positing an interpersonal idea of poetry, poetry as another way someone might aim a “good word” of edification toward a neighbor or friend. Middleton explains her sense of silent communication not only as differing from sanguine, sociable civility but also from the expectations of rather institutionalized realms of experimental art:

The silence is an absence of dialogue, of conversation, due to the distance between poet and reader. Her poem begins there, with this silence, this absence of intersubjectivity, rather than immediately appealing to the universalizing languages and frameworks of modern art and the avant-garde. (Middleton 11)

Niedecker's silence is continuous with her smallness; both are demonstrated on the page, most often through the placement of discrete texts on discrete pages, and she wields both with canny, exploratory rigor.

‘ ‘ ‘

Many critics have keenly attended to Niedecker's consummate deployment of lines in page-space, her way of creating compelling compound texts whose constituent parts and entirety of form are equally magnified by their written arrangement. Mary Pinard asserts that "Niedecker's most characteristic poems inhabit the page architecturally, as if she meant to build pure, essential structures that hang in space, in tribute to and in defiance of the floods that shaped her life" (29-30). This description is especially incisive in how it recognizes Niedecker's *forms* as inherently signifying a resistance to floods, both actual ones and, implicitly, various tendencies toward glut, expansion, and garrulity. Karl Young, in an afterword to a facsimile of Niedecker's homemade version of "Paean to Place" (she hand-wrote the poem, one five-line stanza per page, into a small notebook and gave it to a friend), points to the recurring "blank" or "negative" spaces that are so vital to her verse, gaps "created by logic, syntax, rhythm, and sound properties" (2). Even though these technically pertain to the mind and ear, Niedecker "reflected her sense of how negative space works in lineation, indentation, and other graphic devices" (2). Approaching the question from a more philosophical direction, Lisa Robertson elaborates the thesis that Niedecker's poetry is emphatically a matter of "thinking in lines" (89). Though she doesn't use the word limb, her conception is commensurate. Each line, in its concrete printed or written form, is an articulated part, discrete but placed in complex, physical relation to other such parts. The compositing of these lines lends to each text a sort of suspension or kinetic behavior: "Because it is incompleting, because it holds within in the

material resistance and conscious falsity of perceiving, the thinking line continues to move and turn” (90).<sup>125</sup>

Maybe the most pointed account, and the one that has the most pertinence to my study, is Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s essay “Lorine Niedecker’s ‘Paeon to Place’ and Its Reflective Fusions.” She writes of this longer poem’s<sup>126</sup> “deliberate fragmentation,” its “intense economy,” its “materialist claims,” and its “building a poem by accumulating moments of sincerity” (162). The poem “uses montage as method, suturing disparate materials together, sometimes with syntactic fragments or breaks unfilled by explanation” (162). “Paeon to Place” is an atypically long sequence in Niedecker’s oeuvre, but DuPlessis’s characterization of it could just as readily apply to *Homemade Poems* or even to any single poem of Niedecker’s, no matter how small.

This relevance coalesces most persuasively when DuPlessis gestures to how Niedecker’s lines, as text, operate on the page. “Paeon to Place” “builds meaning by the cut of the fragments and the blaze of white space between parts.” This observation, which could be converted into a credo or adapted into a broader aesthetics in various media, applies not only to all of Niedecker’s work but to all four writers in this study of small poetry. The clause is a perfect encapsulation of how significance works in all small poems. The lines on the page are not merely accidental or functional but are *severed limbs*, their breakages evident and felt. And the

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<sup>125</sup> In a similar sentence, Robertson considers Niedecker’s thinking line in relation to the “sensual cognitive event” of hearing or feeling thought occur in oneself, in one’s body:

Not always fluent, floated on its caesura, stopped by an enjambment, but nevertheless following some call in a direction we could characterize as outward, the thinking line of poetry could be the moving trace and the technology of this sensual cognitive event. (90)

<sup>126</sup> Although the poem is one of several longer, serial works Niedecker composed in the late 1960s, it is written in the form of five-line stanzas, each of which Niedecker accorded its own page in a handwritten gift-book version of the poem she made for a friend. Thus one long poem is also—in a sense, in the form Niedecker presented it—a collection of small poems, much as “Next Year” or *Discrete Series* convey equally the singular and the plural case. However considered, “Paeon to Place” is a study in small poetry, as page and textual arrangement are used to feature compellingly spare, piecemeal lines. Both early and late, then, from “Next Year I Fly My Rounds, Tempestuous” to her late serial works, Niedecker’s commitment to presenting small, composite textual forms is continuous.

page space between and around these severed limbs *blazes*, a forceful phenomenological verb that only makes sense where there is a great quantity of such whiteness, where the black words, instead of dominating the page, seem to be surrounded by it or set deeply into it.

DuPlessis' vision of Niedecker's pages recalls the vision cited in my first chapter, from *Notes on Conceptualism*, especially in its sense of the poetic page as bearing the signs and residues of violence and anxiety. But notice that the blazing whiteness and the lacerations are not said to unsettle, subvert, or defer meaning but to *build* it, without even the standard qualification of the plural—"meanings." Of course Niedecker's small poems, in their scale and fragmentation on the page, *do* generate multiple meanings and *do* unsettle expected meanings; but DuPlessis' contention, in its directness and simplicity, stakes an important claim—that with a poet like Niedecker, the discrepant stabilities and signs of damage in the work as presented can ultimately participate in, or amount to, a matter-of-fact "building of meaning."

In the sentence immediately following the one cited, DuPlessis suggests that the general tenor of such meaning involves a response to a world that is glutted, violent, and confused:

[The poem] rests upon subtle, intense condensation, so that each word choice bears the traces of a struggle between plethora and containment, between permission and repression. (162)

Earlier in the essay, DuPlessis addresses Niedecker's affinity for surreal or subliminal or unconscious elements in poetry. These are also part of the "meaning" that her limbed small poems build, but DuPlessis, citing a line from one of Niedecker's letters to Clayton Eshleman, unambiguously reminds us that Niedecker

is careful to locate these pulsing feelings as originating in reality, and thus a form of realism; about these "gasps" and depths she states, "nevertheless [they are]

response to life's stimuli" (Letter to Eshleman, February 14, 1968). That balanced statement pulls back into explicit realism from reverie and from subconscious depths; it is an indication of her mobile negotiation among tempting positions. (157)

All of Niedecker's poems, to some degree or other, demonstrate this form of realism; and this "mobile negotiation" is most powerfully felt in handwritten, single-page texts like those in *Homemade Poems*. Their air of being fragmented, cut, of floating in charged blank spaces, and their sense of part-ness or partiality are precisely what I mean by that aspect of smallness I have called damage. And Adorno seems to insinuate the same thing in both the word "barbaric" and the word "ascetic," the conscientious incorporation of violence into artworks such that they "repudiate" the "false riches" of a repressive culture of plethora.

### **Conclusion**

The views of the page and of reading articulated above really concern parts and wholes, how a person makes sense and meaning out of piecemeal entities. An early '60s poem of Oppen's or Niedecker's connotes and defies a time of war through its limb-like lines; these are the signs that make the poem, as a text-form on paper, feel both disjointed and meticulously, earnestly crafted.

A book of small poems is an apposite vehicle for such effects, mainly because it is a perfect analogue for the poems in which it consists. Just like any given line of any given small poem, each page-contained text in a book of small poems stands alone, visibly discrete yet also in orderly juxtaposition with other page-texts that lie behind or in front of it, across the binding-gutter or on the poem's backside, the page's obverse.

A small poem is immediately apprehended as a stack of lines; likewise, a book of small poems, when flipped through, plainly presents itself as a stack of separate and separable text-pieces.

In a book like Oppen's *Discrete Series*, or in Niedecker's *New Goose* or *Homemade Poems*, the reader sees and feels structural tension—elision, discontinuity—between the lines of a given single-page poem, and she also sees and feels the interruption created by the brevity of each respective text, the quality of sparseness and truncation that often pitch the reader into a sort of caesura or hiatus as soon as she finishes reading the poem. In other words, each poem, that is, each page, in a book of small poetry is also limb-like.

In spite of these analogous interruptions, one set nesting within the other, both poem and book exist first and last, respectively, as entireties, composite but singular *things*. Thus it might be better to emphasize their status as distinct types of assemblages, as arrangements of parts into objects, provisional wholes.

In a prefatory editorial statement, Simon Cutts, contemporary poet and longtime operator of Coracle Press, puts forth some similar theses about the symbiotic correlation between poem and book. Just following a citation of “Mallarmé and the prospect of *making* a text on the page,” he announces his “conviction that the poem’s ideal manifestation is the book itself, *even to the extent of book-form being the physical metaphor for the poem itself*” (12, my emphasis).

Cutts’s phrase inverts the more intuitive formulation, and in so doing fleshes out a living conception of small poetry in its textual, semiotic, materialist properties. It is not some abstract notion of “the poem” that serves as reference point or model (we might do better to replace “metaphor” with “metonym,” as poems are precisely the things that often go to make up—or in other pertinent phrases, “fill” or “adorn”—a particular book), but the rich form and fact of the

book itself. Every poem is a book, its words and lines “pages.” Vice versa, every book of small texts is a sort of book-shaped poem, each page a line.

‘ ‘ ‘

If Niedecker and Oppen minced words in times of war, the limbed small poetry they constructed—at the level of both page and book—afford *breaks* from violence, from a disorienting reality. Their works during and after World War II enact the very “constructive dissociation” from an illusory, destructive paradigm that Laura Riding spoke of as far back as 1928. To illustrate the viability of this effect of benign breakage, and before moving to a consideration of recent small poetry, I turn back to a striking meditation on violence penned in France during the Nazi occupation.

The age of World War II and its aftermath was one of *force*, not merely the overt kind on display in bombs and combat and death camps, but also the kind that sinks into the everyday, that afflicts the persons conscious of these things with anxiety and bewilderment. In 1939, Simone Weil, another illustrious exponent of mid-twentieth-century “negativity and commitment,” published an essay called “The Iliad, or The Poem of Force.” Ostensibly offering a reading of the Greek epic, she also implicitly enunciates a penetrating diagnosis of her own epoch:

From [force’s] first property (the ability to turn a human being into a thing by the simple method of killing him) flows another, quite prodigious too in its own way, the ability to turn a human being into a thing while he is still alive...[The soul] was not made to live inside a thing; if it does so, under pressure of necessity, there is not a single element of its nature to which violence is not done. (5)

...

Force is as pitiless to the man who possesses it, or thinks he does, as it is to its victims; the second it crushes, the first it intoxicates. The truth is, nobody really possesses it. (11)

The small poems that Niedecker and Oppen and other poets assembled in the 1960s were written in the shadow of this myth of force, in the inescapable atmosphere of its sway. Their poems cannot but show marks and signs of its impinging threat. The poems themselves, however, are not primarily acts of force but the opposite: interruptions of it. Weil says that for the “man who is the possessor of force... nothing has the power to interpose, between the impulse and the act, the tiny interval that is reflection” (14). Spare, fractured, single-page texts provide precisely such a “tiny interval.” As Weil elaborates the idea further, she throws a bright ethical light on this kind of break:

Since other people do not impose on their movements *that halt, that interval of hesitation*, wherein lies all our consideration for our brothers in humanity, they conclude that destiny has given complete license to them, and none at all to their inferiors. (15, emphasis added)

Yet even without venturing something so grand about the ethics of small poems, we can grant that Weil’s thoughts give a persuasive sense of how halt, hesitation, and interval—all of which are integral to small poetics—have value, not abstract idealistic value but what might be called a sort of mystical pragmatic value. In practice, that is, a little text appearing alone on a single page arrests and holds, for a time, our attention. In its particular kind of materiality, it is a sign of human experience beyond a deterministic and unmediated *materialism*, a gesturing bit of firstness and thirdness that juts out from the flattening “outward clash” of secondness, a salutary *snag*.

Contemporary small poet Rae Armantrout, it should be remembered, defines “poetic silence” as precisely the sort of interval or interruption or halt Weil invokes, as a temporal and physical break: “empty space left in a work, or following one, a kind of *stoppage*, a silence that was a gesture...the experience of *cessation*” (“Poetic Silence” 31).

Lorine Niedecker and George Oppen, in respective but complementary ways, enacted such interruptions of force and thus stand as adumbrating small poets, anticipating the work of writers in the ‘80s, ‘90s, and ‘00s, such as Susan Howe, Rae Armantrout, and Myung Mi Kim. These poets’ forms of writing are certainly distinct from Niedecker’s and Oppen’s, but not categorically and finally so; they might be called evolved offshoots of those earlier strains. Howe, Kim, and a company of other “post-modern” poets have also endeavored a radical smallness and partiality on the page in service of a semiotic, historical, and political realism that charts and checks violence.

**Chapter Six:**  
**“Splintered Sketches of Sound”:**  
**Susan Howe’s Realist Sign-Language of Scraps, Grids, & Slips**

In the precinct of Poetry, a word, the space around a word, each letter, every mark, silence, or sound  
 volatilizes an inner law of form—moves on a rigorous line  
 (Howe, *TB* 145)

Dickinson was expert in standing in corners, expert in secret listening and silent understanding...  
 she studied Terror. Adopted parataxis and rupture to tell the feverish haste, the loss,  
 to warn of storm approaching—Brute force, mechanism.  
 (*MED* 116)

Words sounding as seen the same moment on paper will always serve as the closest I can come  
 to cross-identification vis-à-vis counterparts in a document universe.  
*I’m only a gentle reader trying to be a realist. Can you hear me?*  
 (*TM* 61)

Please indifferent reader you  
 into whose hands this book  
 may fall without hope already  
 drawn to essays even so  
 light a sketch of character life  
 (*PA* 119)

In a brief, untitled note included in the anthology *The Line in Postmodern Poetry*, Susan Howe writes, “First I was a painter, so for me, words shimmer. Each one has an aura. Lines are laid on the field of a page, so many washes of watercolor.” She then concludes her prose note with the following sentence, by way of introducing the poem of hers that is printed on the page to come: “Here is a splintered sketch of sound” (209). Her book *Singularities* (1990) corroborates these views in several ways; its first and longest section is called “Articulation of Sound Forms in Time,” and the biographical note on the book’s final page informs us that, after graduating from the Boston Museum School of Fine Arts in 1961 and receiving first prize in painting, ten years passed during which time “her work evolved from painting to *drawing with words* to writing poetry exclusively in 1971.”

Page ten of *Singularities* houses the following “splintered sketch of sound”:

rest chondriacal lunacy  
 velc cello viable toil  
 quench conch uncannunc  
 drum amonoonsuck ythian

---

scow aback din  
 flicker skaeg ne  
 barge quagg peat  
~~sieve catacomb~~  
 stint chisel sect

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There are as many unrecognizable or damaged words here as there are familiar words; it is what some might call an “unreadable” or willfully obscurantist poem, yet though it is patently in collage form rather than conventional clause-driven grammar, the text nonetheless ripples with rhythms, sound patterns, and image-associations—there is a weird but discernible music haunting the page.

In the first stanza, soft, murmuring *m*, *n*, *b*, and *l* sounds offset the stuttering, sharper *k* and *ch* sounds. The second stanza continues to weave these sounds, and continues in the whole poem’s predominant structure of three words (and stresses) per line, all of them equally spaced and of similar length per respective stanza. Beyond, and also through, the prosody, a cryptic state of physical and psychological struggle is evoked through the words chosen. Concrete tools or things such as “cello,” “conch,” “drumm,” “barge,” “peat,” “sieve,” and “catacomb” are inflected with urgency by the more conceptual nouns and noun/verb words accompanying

them: “rest,” “lunacy,” “toil,” “quench,” “flicker,” “scow” (evoking “scowl”), “din,” and “stint” (dislocated as they are, “sieve” and “barge” also carry a doubled noun/verb effect). All of these are words of liminal states, struggle, or reprieve from struggle.

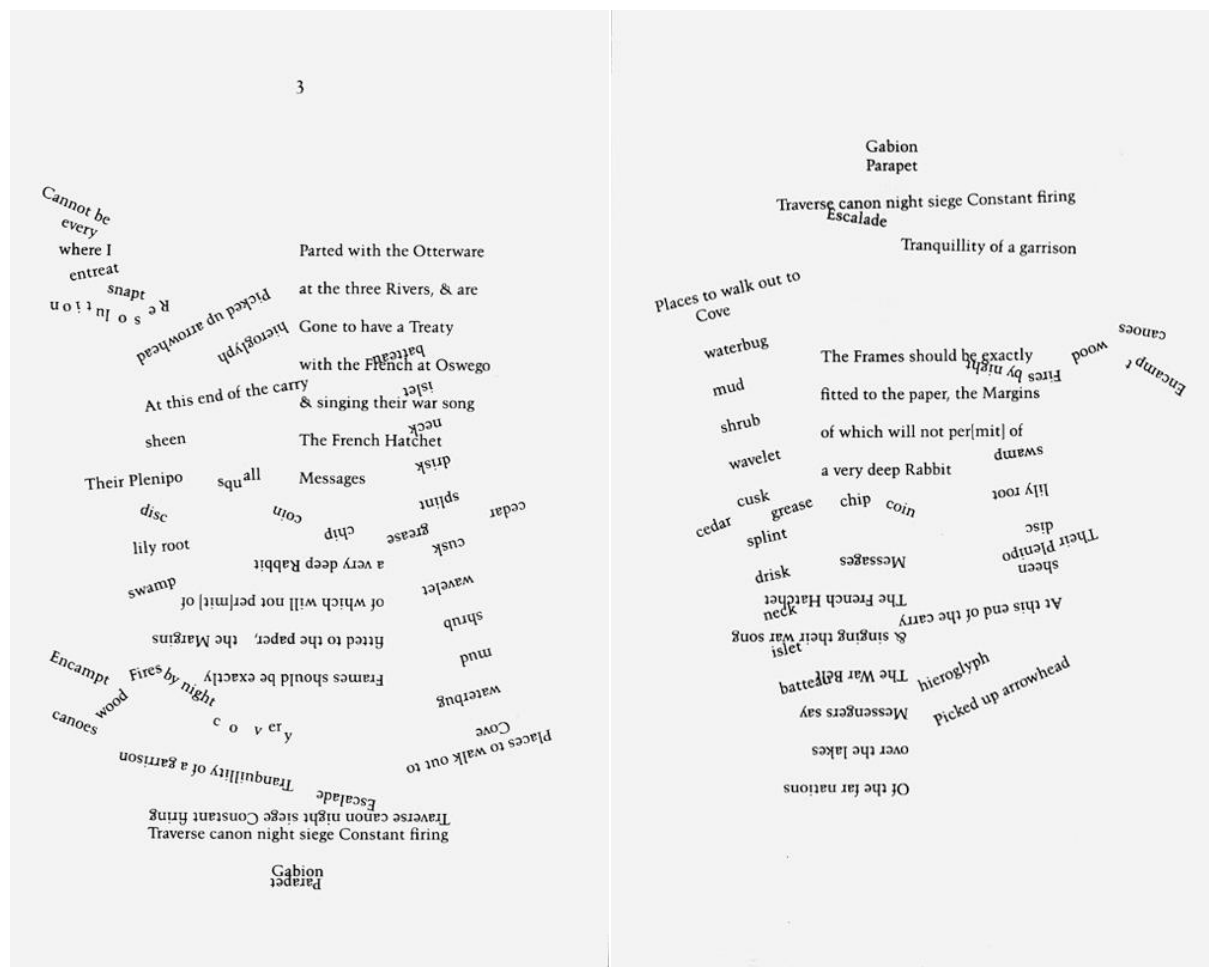
Thus amongst the thicket of consonants, seemingly foreign words, and word-parts—the sounds, the “din”—there is a sort of inchoate picture of someone (a person or party) trying to survive, that is, fumbling for light, for sustenance, for speech, for rest. The poem is stark and more than a bit disorienting in its meanings, its possible narrative, yet that very starkness, evinced in the arrangement of text on the page, is precisely continuous with the sense that the poem has been *formed for some reader*, and this is an orienting sense.

Other pages in “Articulation of Sound Forms in Time” are less linguistically disfigured; they allow semantics and grammar, rather than the mere text-form itself, to reach out part-way to the reader. The first half of the poem on page thirty-one reads:

Girl with forest shoulder  
 Girl stuttering out mask or trick  
 aria out of hearing  
 Sound through cult annunciation  
 sound through initiation Occult  
 Enunciate barbarous jargon  
 fluent language of fanaticism

In this poem, Howe’s “sound forms” in time, in space, are more fully “articulations.” “Girl stuttering out mask or trick,” “Sound through cult annunciation,” “Enunciate barbarous jargon”: these are reflexive *ars poetica* comments, thematic statements that announce facets of an aesthetic position and offer the reader narrow but reliable footholds. As such, these phrases read like engendering prompts or annotations of the more bewildering poem I cited first.

If the reader of lines like these is somewhat reassured, though—glad at least to be reading phrases in couplets, however dislocating the leaps are from line to line and page to page—she will have to endure being truly unsettled when she turns the pages of the book’s later section, “Thorow”; she will have to completely renegotiate her approach to reading. Howe’s poems are always spare and in some sense “small” on the page, but, in keeping with her initial vocation as a painter, as someone for whom “words shimmer,” sometimes she chooses to actually “draw with words.” Sometimes her texts are much more visibly “splintered,” as is this pair of facing pages (56, 57) from “Thorow”:



(S 56-57)

How does one choose, and then manage, to read these overtly wrecked poems? The incorporation of violence into poetry has here become literal, that is, it has become textual, and

irreducibly so. If all of the words of one of these pages were read aloud, those who heard would note a sort of violence in the disjunction between words, but the words would still be unified by the voice reading and the temporal stretch they filled.

On the other hand, the synchronic effect of a discrete verbal catastrophe can only be had when the reader faces the wreckage visually and attempts to read some or all of the words it consists in.<sup>127</sup>

As the cited examples show, Susan Howe's poetic texts take several forms, and though all of them are in some sense spare, it might be asked whether she is truly a small poet, whether her forms and practices correspond to the theories I have put forth and to the poetics of Lorine Niedecker and George Oppen. The latter poems reproduced above, for instance, and the vein of Howe's poetry they represent, seems to pose a very real complication. In one sense, such texts are the best possible exemplars of a poetry of *gliedern*, where dissevered limb-lines are literally strewn or piled onto the page, crowding and overlapping each other: this is "barbaric" writing in a more than subtle or internalized way. In another sense, however, one of Howe's *disjecta membra* poems seems a far cry from one of the four-line poems in Oppen's *Discrete Series* or Niedecker's *New Goose*.

Can a poem that appears to be exploding or exploded communicate smallness?

Indeed, it is not primarily Howe's disfigured collages (which, in any case, constitute a relatively small percentage of her poetry) that qualify her as a small poet, but her more predominant forms—page-centered groups of lines, lately tending toward especially small,

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<sup>127</sup> Indeed, Howe herself fully understands the categorical divide between embedding and depicting violence in her texts. Referring to the sequence *Eikon Basilike* she says: "I felt...that I was crossing into visual art in some sections and that I had unleashed a *picture* of violence" (TB 165, emphasis added).

regular, grid-like dimensions. For example, every poem in her most recent book, *Souls of the Labadie Tract* (2007), is between five and eight lines. The first one reads:

Indifferent truth and trust  
 am in you and of you air  
 utterance blindness of you

That we are come to that  
 Between us here to know  
 Things in the perfect way (27)

Like her muse and model Emily Dickinson and also like Niedecker and Oppen, Howe enacts meaningful refusal and witness through forms of language that are persistently partial and small. Her poems are radically built around disjunction and collage, and they make full use of what James Scully calls the untheorized, punctuating “wild practice” (*pratique sauvage*) of free-verse line-breaks, determined strictly by the poet’s discretionary handiwork. As with Niedecker and Oppen, use of the page and the book as small texts’ interrelated vehicles is central in Howe’s poetics; also like the two quasi-objectivist, books or series of page-texts are regularly given titles, but usually not the discrete texts themselves (most of Oppen’s post-1934 poems, which usually have titles, constitute an exception). Like Niedecker, Howe rigorously graphs stray bits of language into page-contained texts which both point to hard facts—the objective outside world—and also seem like “notations of an inner world” (as Ed Dorn wrote, in 1961, of Niedecker’s poems). Like Oppen she testifies to being “among things” (“The Mind’s Own Place”), that is to say, being “obsessed, bewildered” (*NCP* 166). And like both of them Howe has staunchly pursued a *via negativa* poetics, or what she refers to as an “antinomian” orientation to authority, to making sense or beauty in the expected ways.

In Howe as in the other cases, small wrecked forms—“splintered sketches of sound”—are deliberately fashioned in accord with a larger set of practices, a demonstrated conviction that there is an urgent, abiding need for at least some poetry to resist vigorously all pulls toward being authoritarian, rationalist, comprehensive, loud, or *large*. Thus Howe, too, keeps her own counsel, maintains a certain remove from or non-compliance with conventional expectations of poetry but also from the avant-garde sphere to which she is linked (primarily Language Poetry, in her case).

The barbaric asceticism and metonymic realism that pertain to Niedecker and Oppen, distinguish Howe’s poetry as well. Her pages, too, are discrete, thingly sites that disorient even as they orient—giving pause, interrupting force’s grinding inertias, affording discontinuous caesuras of relief from unrelieved continuities.

Howe writes of Emily Dickinson, her epitome of Antinomian poetics and the prototypic American small poet, that she “was expert in standing in corners, expert in secret listening and silent understanding,” that she “studied Terror” (*MED* 116). Of course Howe sees this expertise exemplified in Dickinson’s poetry, where she “Adopted parataxis and rupture to tell the feverish haste, the loss, to warn of storm approaching—Brute force,<sup>128</sup> mechanism” (116). Such a reading of Dickinson’s poetics applies also to small poets a century later, including Howe herself. Yet, even though Niedecker, Oppen, and Howe all have, in their respective ways, stood in corners, listened secretly, and used “wrecked” language (“parataxis and rupture”) to lament and to oppose a brutal, mechanical reality—though there are commonalities, there are also key

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<sup>128</sup> Although Charles Sanders Peirce is nowhere cited in *My Emily Dickinson*, and *Pierce-Arrow* would not appear for fourteen more years, this term “Brute force” is the very term Peirce uses to characterize secondness in the universe, the reality of inflexible, regulating, often obliterating law which needs the leavening of firstness (chance, play, possibility), and the mediations of thirdness (thought, language, flexible habit). Howe may have read Peirce’s work and slipped this allusion into her study. Or her use of the term could be merely a coincidental presaging.

ways that Susan Howe and her writing are different, ways she stands apart, studying and listening in corners of her own.<sup>129</sup>

On the surface, Howe's most obvious distinguishing marks are her more patently shattered lines—bearing not only greater violence but suggesting a more constructivist approach to *poesis* than the more subtractive one suggested by Niedecker's and Oppen's texts—and her greater output of prose, in particular the fact that her poetic books are often begun and/or interlaced with prose. There is also the fact that Howe's books tend to include various images amongst the poems and prose: photographs, facsimiles of manuscripts, etchings. With the exception of Niedecker's *My Friend Tree* (where semi-abstract black linocut prints accompany the poems), such image-interweaving is not common in small poetry books, or, it should be added, in most books of poems.

Underlying these surface-signs, however, is a more fundamental difference: Susan Howe, alone among the writers discussed thus far and among all American poets, has been throughout her career *expressly* concerned with the issues intrinsic to what I am calling small poetry. She not only writes small poems but writes about forms of poetic refusal, and she has inquired of these forms in restless, tireless, illuminating ways. In her two books of scholarship, in the prose interspersed through her books of poetry, and even in her verse itself, she foregrounds questions of how “little, wrecked” poetries are significant. She asks these questions again and again, offering only provisional answers in a sort of relentless, good faith, investigative writerly *agon*.

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<sup>129</sup> I earlier used the term “genus” to indicate my sense of a small poem category in order to leave ample room in the analogy for sub-groups—such as, perhaps, Niedecker and Oppen as wayward objectivsts—to be considered as constituting distinct species, or, what is more pertinent to critical practice, to afford room for every given poet to be regarded as a singular creature. Susan Howe, among those I have posited as exemplars of small poetry in twentieth-century America, is probably the most *sui generis*.

As a theorist of small poetry Susan Howe is a candid and determined inquirer, not a polemical explainer. Both her questions and her declarations, many of them spelled out through her attentions to Emily Dickinson, articulate how small poetry can be conscientiously taken up as a response to American conditions and buried realities:

Why are we such a violent nation? Why do we have such contempt for  
powerlessness? (*TB* 164)

...

Poetry is affirmation in negation, ammunition in the yellow eye of a gun that an  
allegorical pilgrim will shoot straight into the quiet of Night's frame. (*MED* 138)

...

To find affirmation in renunciation and to be (herself) without. Outside  
authority, eccentric and unique. (*MED* 28)

...

What *is* the communal vision of poetry if you are curved, odd, indefinite,  
irregular, feminine?... Dickinson means this to be an ugly verse...*All thumbs—*  
Awkward. (*MED* 118, 119)

...

It's *the stutter* in American literature that interests me. I hear the stutter as *a*  
*sounding of uncertainty. What is silenced or not quite silenced.* (*MED* 181, emphasis  
added)

Howe announces strength in seeming weakness; she resolutely asserts the inexhaustible meanings and the challenges of the small, the frail, the hesitant, the cryptic, the putatively powerless—all things that are usually gendered as feminine. Thus to turn to Susan Howe is not

just to move forward to another point in a progressive small poetry lineage; it is rather to turn to the veritable heart of things, to *return* to beginnings, that is, depths or latencies: the crises of settlers in the “wilderness”<sup>130</sup> of North America, the Puritans in their struggle to survive and make meaning, the decimation of the Native Americans—all the voices, facts, and *signs* that have been repressed or misread. Indeed, to turn to Howe is also to turn to the roots of this study. Her poems and her scholarship—in particular her reclamatory theorizing of Antinomianism, her reading of Dickinson, and her singular engagement with Peirce—instigated and made a way for *this* long essay in the first place. And Howe still serves as a remarkable constellating presence, helping to make the embodied concept of small poetry visible through conjunctions and correlations among persons and ideas.

There is much excellent critical work on Howe.<sup>131</sup> And several prominent critics of Howe’s work—like Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Peter Quartermain, Michael Davidson, and Kathleen Fraser—are also dynamic readers of George Oppen and Lorine Niedecker. But neither these nor other critics have put forth any rubrics that relate and synthesize these poets. Instead of reading Howe either in flat-footed relation to Language Poetry or, conversely, as an eccentric solitary, I will envisage her as standing squarely at the heart of a particular strain of American poetics.

This chapter, then, gathers itself around three tasks:

1) Through attention to her poetics, I will show that Susan Howe, like Niedecker and Oppen, is herself a small poet: a poet of rooms and hands and piled limbs; a poet of signs,

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<sup>130</sup> In an interview, Howe notes that the world “wilderness” is inapt and meaningless to Native Americans, but she also adds, “[s]till, it’s a resonant typological word. A necessary emblem” (161).

<sup>131</sup> See for example Rachel Blau DuPlessis’ essay “Howe,” Michael Davidson’s *Ghostlier Demarcations* chapter on “Palimtexts,” Peter Quartermain’s *Disjunctive Poetics: From Gertrude Stein to Susan Howe*, Craig Dworkin’s “Waging Political Babble,” and Rachel Tzvia Back’s book-length study, *Led By Language*, to name a few of the most incisive. Another full-length study of Howe, by Elisabeth Joyce, has just been published this year—its uncannily pertinent title is *The Small Space of a Pause: Susan Howe’s Poetry & the Spaces Between*—and a book by Gerald Bruns, devoted solely to Howe and Lyn Hejinian, is forthcoming.

silence, stoppage, and damage; a poet whose discrete, fragmentary forms enact an emblematic metonymic realism.

2) In a manner not unlike that found in Howe's scholarly prose, I will assemble a host of citations—from many of the critics just mentioned, from Howe herself, and from some Peirce-related material—that will flesh out the small-poetry connections gathered around her and will also further crystallize small poetry in general. These connections, especially those relating to Peirce and to spare, single-page form as such, are at present implicit but unformulated in Howe's work and in criticism of her work (as only one small indication of this latency, consider that although Howe devotes an entire book of poems to reading and responding to Peirce, no one has devoted even one essay to reading Howe in terms of the philosopher).

3) Most importantly, as regards questions of form in Howe, I will argue that even though her oeuvre as a whole comprises a protean array of spare, "damaged" texts, some of which are radically splayed and splintered, as shown above, it is the decidedly tame-looking and consistent grid-like text-forms of her recent books (which she has employed almost exclusively and with little variation in scale or design) that best signifies Howe's complex of abiding commitments and most consummately evinces her small-poetry partisanship. As no one has directly acknowledged this strong shift in Howe's writing, I will propose an account of her turn to what I am calling "lattice-glyphs."<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> "Lattice" is arrived at here through the merging of two related trope-words. Paul Celan's title *Sprachgitter* is usually translated "speech-grille," but "gitter" also means screen, grid, or lattice. Howe herself, a painter whose professed model was Agnes Martin we should remember, has referred to some of her poems as "airy grids," but she has more thoroughly shown an investment in a sort of *typology of textiles*: weaving, stitching, fabric, garments, drapery, etc. I thought about referring to the poems as "swatches," representative scraps of fabric to which Howe herself calls attention, but "lattice"—connoting a grid-like screen but also woven material and the vines that might be tangled into it—seems a better term. "Glyph," of course, is simply added to foreground Howe's evident attention to form as emblematic. Critic Brian Reed has introduced the term "word squares" in an essay on Howe (that also mentions Myung Mi Kim); and Rachel Blau DuPlessis speaks of Howe's poetry generally as "matted palimpsests" ("Howe" 126). These terms suits the two critics' respective purposes, but "lattice-glyphs" is more keyed to my own specific interest in the latter phase of Howe's career.

There is a sort of quietism implicit in Susan Howe's carefully shaped and iterated boxes, but one finds there also, as Rachel Blau DuPlessis so aptly notes, "her rage," her abolishing of authority, her smashing of established icons in order to reconstruct new ones.<sup>133</sup>

### **Grounds: The Second World War & Charles Olson**

The present study is not strictly chronological and certainly does not aim to offer a smooth evolutionary story of small poetry in the twentieth century. In moving to Susan Howe, who is still writing, we are moving all at once toward and into the present, vaulting over, as it were, several worthy practitioners of small poetry. Nonetheless, there are some crucial overlaps and correlations between Howe's work and that of Niedecker and Oppen. Howe was born in 1937, just after the 1934 small poetry moment I postulated in the second chapter; and, after pursuing painting, she began writing poems almost exactly when Niedecker died, in 1970. Her first few books—*Hinge Picture* (1974), *The Western Borders* (1976), and *Secret History of the Dividing Line* (1978)—match almost precisely the publication sequence of Oppen's final three books.<sup>134</sup> Less superficially, there are the shared influences of the Second World War and the emergence of the New American Poetry, most cogently figured in Charles Olson.

Howe was one generation behind Niedecker and Oppen. She didn't experience the Depression first-hand, but she would have felt something of its nearness; and she did grow up in and after the Second World War, which enormous fact shadowed her childhood and lodged irrevocably in her consciousness a conviction of the indissoluble reality of violence:

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<sup>133</sup> This propensity amounts to Howe's ever-explored and -espoused Antinomianism, as I will show. It also brings to mind Muriel Rukeyser's distinction between "poets of outrage" and "poets of possibility" in *The Life of Poetry* (82ff). Tellingly, looking at the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Rukeyser presents Whitman as the "emblem" poet of possibility and Herman Melville—for whom Howe has exhibited a profound affinity—as exemplar of poetic outrage in that century (83).

<sup>134</sup> *Seascape: Needle's Eye* (1972), *Myth of the Blaze* (1975) and *Primitive* (1978).

The photographs of children during the war in Europe, when I was a small child and the Holocaust was in progress—not only the Holocaust but the deaths of millions of people in Europe and Asia—prevented me from ever being able to believe history is only a series of justifications or that tragedy and savagery can be theorized away (*TB* 163-64).

Rachel Tzvia Back notes that unlike some of her younger Language Poetry “contemporaries,” Howe’s earlier birth year means that her childhood unfolded “*in the midst* of [World War II’s] chaos when complete destruction felt like a real possibility” (14), and Back argues, therefore, that “[t]he violence that permeates Howe’s work may be read as a consequence of her specific historical consciousness formed, in part, by her being born *into* the destruction and chaos of World War II” (13, author’s emphasis). In one way, then, Howe’s haunted youth could be said to give her an even keener knowledge of modernity’s capacities for violence and death than either Niedecker or Oppen had.<sup>135</sup> In any case, through the ‘20s and ‘30s for two, and through the ‘40s, ‘50s, and ‘60s for all three, these poets experienced similar formative and galvanizing conditions: violence at home and abroad, the rampant proliferation of technology and marketing, glut generally, and the perpetual American impulse of rationalist progressivism that was chronically bent on repressing anything that seemed incriminating or ugly or weak.

These things that Howe experienced as a child and into adulthood drove her to search out the sources and buried threads of American violence. In an interview, Howe asks plainly, “Why are we such a violent nation? Why do we have such contempt for powerlessness?” and then, instead of pronouncing answers, explains the mission such questions induce: “I feel

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<sup>135</sup> Oppen did fight and was wounded in the war—without question he saw and felt its horrors—but he was a grown man of thirty-four when he enlisted, someone who had already well acquired grim knowledge of chaos, destruction, and the unrealized potentials for same. Also, it is worth remembering that, analogously to Howe, Niedecker and Oppen grew up precisely “*in the midst of*” and after the First World War.

compelled in my work to go back, not to the Hittites but to the invasion or settling, or whatever current practice calls it, of *this* place” (164).

These devastations of force haunt and fascinate Susan Howe; and she engages them not chiefly to explain or “out-force” them with discourse but to interrupt them by retrieving buried voices that seem powerless and by interjecting her own seemingly powerless “sound forms.” She wants to create fruitful hesitations, reflective *intervals*. So it should be no surprise that in this same interview Howe mentions Simone Weil’s thoughts on these matters: “Another short work about writing and place and force is Simone Weil’s essay “The Iliad, Poem of Might” (158).

Just before citing Weil in the interview, Howe had been discussing Olson’s *Call Me Ishmael* and Olson’s influence on her poetics. A cursory look at Olson shows him announcing a breath-driven, forceful, *large* mode of poetry, but he also dynamically brought into play several approaches that poets of a different disposition, like Robert Creeley, turned to account in smaller poetics. For Howe as for Niedecker and Oppen, Olson’s writing resonated for its conviction that poetic form should always be negotiated—moment by moment, page by page, even line by line—in direct relation to the facts, both immediate and distant (“historical”), that impinged upon it, and to the ways the poet’s mind and body processed those facts.

Olson’s writing energetically brought *roots* back into American poetics, as both form and content. As for content, the question of poetry’s commitment to historical knowledge and the reality it indexed, Howe stands squarely in a lineage that includes the Objectivists as well as the Projectivists. Eliot Weinberger—who wrote the preface to Oppen’s *Collected Poems*, where he says that Oppen gives the sense of a man “trying to speak in the roar of history” (xiii)—also wrote an essay on Niedecker, examining her post-war discovery of a “way to incorporate history

into the poem” (“Niedecker/Reznikoff” 186). This assertion leads him to other poets, including Howe:

This was a return to one of poetry’s primary traditional roles, as the repository for what a culture has known about itself, a role explored by only a handful of the American modernists: Pound, Williams (in *American Grain* and *Paterson*), Eliot (in *The Waste Land*), Reznikoff, Rexroth, Rukeyser, Olson, Duncan and, these days, perhaps only Susan Howe and Ed Sanders. Niedecker, among them, was the most extreme and the most crystalline. (187)

Weinberger’s essay is part of a book of essays on Niedecker, *Radical Vernacular: Lorine Niedecker and the Poetics of Place*. Significantly, though Oppen’s name is sprinkled through the book’s pieces, this is the only mention of Susan Howe. Niedecker might indeed be justly called the “most crystalline” of these history-haunted American poets, but I would argue that Susan Howe’s work contends for the much more vexed status of “most extreme.” Regardless, Howe is also, as Weinberger says of Niedecker, “an intense lyric poet with epic content (187).

When I say that Olson also championed *roots* as an issue of form, I am alluding to a conceit that galvanized Howe’s sense of how words could actually be put onto paper, how voice might be constructed as assemblages of markings. In a small poem not included in *Maximus*, called “These Days,” Olson writes:

whatever you have to say, leave  
the roots on, let them  
dangle

And the dirt

Just to make clear  
where they come from (Olson, *Collected Poems* 106)

“Making clear” where words come from is an issue of content and fact, perhaps, but the exhortation here toward including *dangling roots and dirt* implies an issue of form.

In 2007’s *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, Howe reflects on her writing in the 1980s. She remembers, “I wanted to transplant words onto paper with soil sticking to their roots” (*SLT* 16). Howe doesn’t cite Olson here, which is appropriate, as she is channeling him and recasting his trope. In Howe’s version, it is the paper and the “sticking soil” that are privileged. She says elsewhere that Olson was most influential for her because of his way of speaking, which Howe refers to as “the feminine” in Olson’s poetry: “It’s voice...It has to do with the presence of absence. With articulation of sound forms. The fractured syntax, the gaps, the silences are equal to the sounds in *Maximus*” (*TB* 180). Olson put words onto pages in ways that evoked a halting, broken, *mexsy* voice; his poetry gave place to forms and sounds and associations that were “soiled,” dirty.<sup>136</sup>

Of course the notion of “dirty” or “messy” here is a sort of ironic, inverted one, a reclaiming of terms that conventional authorities might use to denigrate such voices or forms as Olson’s and Howe’s. In Howe’s case, the affinity with Olson’s voice and with soil- and root-bearing words pertains to the great value she places on articulated sound forms that are fractured, elliptical, or silent. Howe’s poetics is actually the exact opposite of anything messy or

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<sup>136</sup> What I have in mind here is not only a matter of poetics on the page, but of an ethos of responsibility and compunction. Nathaniel Mackey, in *Paracritical Hinge*, pinpoints the way such an ethos underlies Olson’s outward bluster:

Poets of my generation tend to look askance at the large claims for the poet that poets like Olson and Duncan make, especially where they warm over romantic senses of the poet’s mission or smack of moralizing self-aggrandizement...What strengthens Olson’s position and protects it against the charge of naivete, however, is his willingness to acknowledge himself to be an heir to the corrupt power he condemns. He can own up to certain spoils the poet gathers from the workings of that power, can admit, as we have seen, that imperialism gives “a language the international power / poets take advantage of.” In this we see the workings of *not a clean but a troubled conscience*. (88, emphasis added)

This use of “troubled,” and more particularly the notion of a “troubled conscience” as against a “clean” one, accords with the reality-attuned, line-breaking, text-condensing reticence of small poetry.

frivolous. Her way of making poems is consummately deliberate, almost devotional, in its movements:

To an almost alarming extent—alarming for me—sound creates meaning. Sound is the core. If a line doesn't sound right, and I do always have single lines or single words in mind, if a line doesn't have some sort of rhythm to it, if my ear tells me it's wrong, I have to get rid of it, or change it, and a new meaning may come then. ("The Difficulties" 21)

The notion of working from sound and voice, which is often associated with the conventional idea that lyric poetry emanates from an autonomous, metaphysical self, is not usually used to characterize *textual* experimentation and collage-based poetic methods, but that is precisely the dialectic Howe's work embodies. She embraces the dirty yet meticulous work of arranging word material on the page not as a counterargument against the concept of voice (as if it is an objectively virulent myth), but, believing it to be a vital tie to reality, in order to preserve it through re-imagining and constructing it afresh *as writing*. James Longenbach, in *The Resistance to Poetry*, argues that there are a host of often underacknowledged poetic performances like this

that undermine the notion of a singular speaking voice more *violently* than [Louise] Glück's performances from Williams to Olson to Susan Howe. These poets ask us to confront *the constructedness of a speaking voice* in all lyric poetry... (Longenbach 66-67, emphasis added)

The "violence" that Longenbach refers to is primarily syntactical and textual violence, and it is what Howe feels as an absolutely necessary, urgent method of retrieving and portraying real suffering, real voices: "I think the outside...consists of other people's struggles and their voices. Sounds and spirits (ghosts if you like) leave traces in a geography" (*TB* 156). Howe studies and

tracks these spectral traces and makes her poems so saliently constructed, so mysteriously polyphonic and disjointed, in order to counter those forces that tend to abstract, hide, or disguise reality:

What is behind the mask? But you have to strike through it. The mask is the icon. The icon may be a mask....I mean that's why I am concerned that so much of my work *carries violence in it*. I don't want to be of Ahab's party. I want to find peace. Anyway, you balance on the edge in poetry. (*TB* 177, emphasis added)

In the long shadow of World War II, catalyzed by Olson's feminine voice-forms, and following approximately the paths Oppen and Niedecker cut, whereby they elaborated spare, discrete, page-contained texts at once cryptic and realist, Susan Howe has balanced on the edge and elaborated her scrappy poetics.

### **Scraps & Piecemeal Poetics**

Susan Howe's poetics is scrappy not only because it carries violence in it but also in much the same way Niedecker's and Oppen's is, the denotative way—its words, phrases, references, and echoes are so many scraps of language, pieces taken up and worked into something that becomes meaningful precisely when it is incised onto the silence of the page:

You open yourself and let language enter, let it lead you somewhere. I never start with an intention for the subject of a poem. I sit quietly at my desk and let *various things—memories, fragments, bits, scraps, sounds*—let them all work into something.

This has to do with changing order and abolishing categories. It has to do with *sounds in silence*. It has to do with peace. (164, emphasis added)

This passage has powerful echoes of Niedecker: her twice-uttered phrase, “movement in stillness out of which the action of words comes clear” (*CW* 68) and her confession: “I think lines of poetry I might use—all day long and even in the night” (*CW* 10).

If the generative stage for each of these writers is somewhat similar, and even if this similarity accounts for the small or damaged quality in Niedecker and Oppen, Howe’s poetic *structures* themselves do stand apart. Niedecker and Oppen push against grammar, and the voice of a given poem is likely to sound exhausted, deadpan, whispered, or a little distressed, but traceable syntaxes more or less prevail. Each of their poems still tends to maintain an implicit subject’s thread of thought, albeit a thread that has been made partial or frayed through eliminative processes: condensation, excision, elision, and abrupt truncation. Howe’s work, of course, is not exclusive of these methods, but her spare paratactic verses exhibit a poetry much more emphatically constructivist and assemblage-based than subtractive.<sup>137</sup>

For Susan Howe, there is no functional separation between words as *materia poetica* and the physical materials of writing. Emily Dickinson is her model of how the two can converge in a dynamic poetics. Not only are Dickinson’s poems built around charged verbal interruptions and cryptic phrasings, but they also inhabit inextricably the physical handiwork of page and fascicle. In her introduction to *The Birth-mark*, called ‘*Disjunct Leaves*,’ Howe refers to Dickinson’s writings not as if they are disembodied artworks but as a collection of “multiple multilayered scripts, set notes, and scraps,” as “multifaceted visual and verbal productions” most characterized by their “layerings and fragile immediacies” (19). There is, in other words, an analogous relationship between on the one hand, words and lines as discrete “limbs,” and on the other hand, groupings of inscribed pages, *disjunct leaves*.

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<sup>137</sup> I should acknowledge here that the later poetries of both Niedecker and Oppen do increasingly make use of forms and methods that evince assemblage as much or more than subtraction or condensation.

Howe writes *after* her Emily Dickinson, endeavors in the same vein, making discrete texts whose “layerings and fragile immediacies” (both respective and collective) are as visual and physical as they are verbal. Words and sounds are so many *disjecta membra*, Sybil’s windblown and fragmentary leaf-scrap of language; but, for all that, words and sounds are no less real or significant as signs. Poems should therefore be constructed as arrangements of parts, piecemeal wholes, and those gestalt-signs should be presented on commensurately disjunct leaves, that is, pages. “[T]hese poems of mine,” declares Howe, simply enough, “are singular works on pages” (*TB* 173). Her view of the significance of page-space, however, is far from simple; indeed, it is both technically thoroughgoing as well as nearly sacramental.

The “various...memories, fragments, bits, scraps, sounds” that Howe “lets in” or finds as she approaches the page, occur to her almost as objects; they seem to be “pieces still in the air there” (172). These pieces are transcribed and translated from the air to the page, according to a reverent and almost mystical conviction that “In the precinct of Poetry, a word, the space around a word, each letter, every mark, silence, or sound volatizes an inner law of form—moves on a rigorous line” (*B* 145). Interestingly, Howe elsewhere calls attention to this neglected emblematics of page-based text deployment precisely by pointing to line breaks:

It takes a poet to see how urgent this subject of line breaks is. But then how often do critics consider poetry as a physical act? Do critics look at the print on the page, at the shapes of words, at the surface—the space of the paper itself? Very rarely. (*TB* 157)

And again, although Howe is invoking a whole sphere of poetics—projective, concrete, etc.—that exploit writing as a material activity, it is her own particular way of using the page that is so striking, that is, her persistent positing of small texts *within* their own pages, such that the

surrounding space seems to envelop or centripetally solidify the floating form, the “pieces still in the air there.” As Howe puts it: “Lots of blank space is essential to acoustically locate each dead center phoneme and allophone tangle somewhere between low comedy and lyric sanctity” (*SLT* 18).

Using pages according to this vision, sometimes with the enhancement of foregoing page numbers, achieves the double effect of unsettling the semantic and communicative “givens” of the linguistic signs as well as pulling the reader into a ruminative encounter. Peter Quartermain and Jerome McGann help make these points, respectively:

The blankness of the page surrounding each poem in the sequence—and indeed Howe’s deeply ingrained necessity to compose in units of one page—is essential to the poem’s decontextualizing of utterance (Quartermain, *Disjunctive Poetics* 192)

...

In the first (Montemora) edition of [*Pythagorean Silence*], the reader is subtly moved toward that reimagination [of the physical field of the printed work] by the absence of numbers on the pages. Their removal inhibits the serial inertia of the codex format, slowing down the process of reading slightly, urging that we stay for a while with each individual page. (McGann 101)

Niedecker was also adamantly committed to housing her texts on discrete pages, as evidenced in her published books and especially in her handmade books like *Homemade Poems*, where every handwritten piece is amply housed by an unnumbered page. This page-use is clearly one of the primary means by which she accomplished “planting the poems in deep, silence” so that “each person gets at the poems for himself” (*BYM* 241), and one of the primary ways Howe effects the same thing.

Every poem in Howe's books is planted in silence, not so much in spite of but because it is *pieced* together, made of scraps. Her pages take on the status of *revolutionary enclosures*, sites where some reader can experience the same cycles or dialectics that the writer experiences: scattering and gathering, sound and silence, movement and stillness, chaos and order. Howe, the writer, says she starts "in a place with fragments, lines and marks, stops and gaps, and then I have more ordered sections and then things break up again" (*TB* 166). When she speaks of her work in general, implicitly characterizing her readers' experience, the trope of ongoing revolution reappears:

I think a lot of my work is about breaking free: starting free and being captured and breaking free again and being captured again (166).

Howe's austere, elegiac, yet lively pages arrest and release readers again and again. Her pieced-together collages are revolutionary in another sense, too, though, the sense of revolt. They refuse to privilege, or even give equal play to, the pole of "order" and "breaking free"; instead they show real abiding allegiance to the state of "being captured," the state where "things break up." Herein lies the thing that makes Howe a true small poet, apart from many of her contemporaries. Her poetry is not so much lyrical or avant-garde as it is *antinomian*.

### **Antinomianism & Typology**

The energy, intensity, and unstinted rigor of Howe's poetic practices, her piecing together of voice-haunted small text-forms, is not derived primarily from an avant-garde dispensation but from an antinomian—which is also to say a deeply typological—one. This is more than an affinity Howe has; it is a vocation, whereby she situates herself in an Antinomian and typological tradition of those who, simultaneously rebellious and pious, strayed and

stuttered yet persisted in the midst of their often bewildering struggles. Few poets incorporate these stutters in a more full or more carefully modulated way than Susan Howe.

In *The Birth-mark: unsettling the wilderness in American history*, Susan Howe pursues what she sees as neglected and banished “antinomian” American voices, mostly those of women. These voices were and still are “a contradiction to canonical social power, whose predominant purpose seems to have been to render isolate *voices devoted to writing as a physical event of immediate revelation*” (1, emphasis added). Her sense of the category extends well beyond its mere technical definition in religious history and the Antinomian crisis of 1637:

An antinomian is a religious enthusiast (11)

...

The antinomian controversy in New England (1636-38) didn't leave Massachusetts with its banished originator. The antinomian controversy continues in the form, often called formlessness, of Dickinson's letters and poems during and after her crisis years of 1858-60. It continues with this nineteenth-century antinomian poet's gesture of infinite patience in preferring not to publish. Her demurral was a covenant of grace (1).

...

There are other characteristic North American voices and visions that remain antinomian and separatist (2).

...

Bartleby's “I would prefer not to” is an antinomian gesture (12).

Small poetry is one form that such antinomianism has taken. Writers who “prefer not to,” who “demur” or separate themselves in order to pursue their own enthusiasms, are often neglected

or banished for being reticent or “odd” or “obscure.” Howe addresses Niedecker’s case in this light, implying the gross injustice involved. She notes that the Objectivists are usually thought of chiefly as a group of three men, “Oppen, Reznikoff, Zukofsky,” and that “Niedecker is added to the Objectivists but always with the sense that without Zukofsky her writing would be inconceivable” (Howe, *TB* 166). Thankfully this patronizing misconception is being countered and rooted out more and more as time passes, but Niedecker’s staunch commitment to “small” forms and practices will always make her susceptible to being relegated to (contained by) a lesser or more peripheral category than her rightful peers.

One of Niedecker’s late small poems avers in its first line, “[N]ot all harsh sounds displease—” (271). This could be considered a credo for Howe, too, a motto of her notion of antinomian poetics. It echoes her account of Dickinson’s poetry as having “a rough-hewn intensity,” as being “emphatic” in its seeming awkwardness, even as designedly “ugly” (*MED* 112, 119, 118).

We also find an arresting convergence of Howe and George Oppen in a discussion of poetic antinomianism, but the discussion is not Howe’s. Michael Davidson, in his introduction to George Oppen’s *New Collected Poems*, raises the question of refusal and antinomianism in relation to writing, in order to locate Oppen as a participant in this lineage:

The context of refusal has a rich and varied history in American literature, one that begins with Puritanism and its fears of Antinomian rebellion. Poets from Edward Taylor and Anne Bradstreet through Emily Dickinson, Robert Creeley, and Jack Spicer have all been skeptical of the full, adequate word, preferring, as Emily Dickinson said, to “tell all the Truth but tell it slant.” We may see George Oppen’s poetics as emerging within this tradition...(Davidson xxxvi)

Susan Howe is a spectral presence in this passage. It is odd that she is not mentioned in place of, or at least just after, Jack Spicer. Howe is the consummate exemplar of contemporary antinomian poetics, something Davidson himself explores in his book *Ghostlier Demarcations*. A chapter there called “Palimtexts”<sup>138</sup> is expressly devoted to considering Howe’s and Oppen’s related strategies of textual experimentation. He notes that in Dickinson “Howe sees evidence of a kind of antinomian resistance that has threatened the American errand historically and that continues to challenge latter-day versions of manifest destiny”; and that “Howe’s own experimentalism is similarly implicated” (81).

Davidson’s discussion also occasions a reconsideration of the relations between religion—specifically Puritanism, the dominant form of Christianity in early colonial settlements—and poetic language in America. The well-worn opposition that Davidson invokes places organized religion, dogmatic promulgators of “the full, adequate word,” in a strict, inimical conflict with poets who are skeptical of such dogma, poets who question “the word” or engage it slant-wise. This depiction is useful and basically sound, but the actual relations between religion and poetry, especially as Susan Howe theorizes and espouses antinomianism, are much more complicated. Taylor and Bradstreet, after all, were *devout Puritans* (Taylor a minister); if we now choose to view them as exhibiting antinomian skepticisms and explorations

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<sup>138</sup> Davidson explains his concept of this term in several places. Here is the synopsis he gives in a recent essay-version of this chapter, published in a book on George Oppen:

By [palimtext] I mean to emphasize the intertextual—and intera-discursive—quality of postmodern writing as well as its materiality. The palimtext is neither a genre nor an object, but a writing-in-process that may make use of any number of textual sources. As its name implies the palimtext retains vestiges of prior writings out of which it emerges. Or more accurately, it is the still-visible record of its responses to those earlier writings. // We can easily see evidence of such palimtextual writing in recent writers like Susan Howe, Bob Perelman, Kathy Acker, Bruce Andrews, Michael Palmer, Ken Irby, Paul Metcalf, and Clark Coolidge, who make extensive use of documentary or “found language.” In these poets, the material nature of the sign and its specifically social and discursive context become major features of composition. (“Palimtexts,” 26)

in poetry, we cannot suppress the fact that these practices were forms of “religious enthusiasm” (as Howe puts it) emerging from persistent lives of religious commitment. Neither Taylor nor Bradstreet would have professed skepticism of “the full, adequate word,” and they would have vehemently repudiated any ascription of antinomian rebellion to their beliefs or works.

None of that is to say that Davidson is exactly wrong about these two Puritan poets or about the matter in general. There are skeptical, antinomian elements in evidence in both cases, but most of them grow *from* Puritan theology, not in spite of or in rebellion against it. This dialectic is precisely what Susan Howe affirms—not just the vital slant-truths of the seemingly heterodox but also, more so in some ways, the almost unspeakable desires and gestures that are buried inside the language of the legitimately orthodox. American Puritanism compels her as a cauldron of this dialectic because its adherents attempted to negotiate an utterly unknown, grueling “frontier” situation through a total reliance on the riches and volatilities of language, that is, specifically, their reliance on certain doctrines and traditions concerning signs—semiology and typology. The primary complexity here, the thing so central to Howe’s poetics, is the slippery boundaries between what were considered pious, orthodox uses of language (or other signs) and what were considered dangerous, rebellious, antinomian ones. The “full, adequate word,” in Davidson’s terms, indicates *logos*—the invisible, incorporeal truth of God’s “Word”—but the Puritans believed that human language was fallen, that is, unreliable and coarse in its materiality. Like other parts of the physical world that count as possible signs, words are riddled with indeterminacy; the import of all signs and types is entirely contingent on how they are used and interpreted. Words were tools, gifts, but they were not divine language itself; human words—spoken or written, in a sermon or in a poem—were “in the image of” the divine “Word.” Puritan language was expected to gesture (however imperfectly) to this divine

reality and also to attest to the speaker's or writer's humble but urgent desire to get beyond the realm of mere visible, material signs.

Thus, for poets like Taylor and Bradstreet to enact a linguistic skepticism in poetry arguably means they were demonstrating a deeply pious anxiety over inadequate human words in order to venerate the divine Word in its fullness and adequation. On the other hand, passionate attempts to use language in meaningfully “slanted ways” or to interpret any signs in one's own way and space (apart from what was authorized by community leaders) are precisely the sorts of waywardness that might leave a Puritan open to the charge of antinomianism—whose central “heresy” amounts to the overemphasizing of freedom and grace over law and authority. So, for Puritans, the experience of language was dialectical, but in a sort of “sacralized pragmatic” sense, not a Socratic or Hegelian one. The visible world—including words and other signs and types—is not in an antithetical, conflicting relation to the invisible world, and furthermore, the joining of these realms is mysterious, deferred, and suspended, not manifested through philosophical synthesis.

The “context of refusal” Davidson posits, this “tradition” that includes Bradstreet, Dickinson, Oppen, and Howe, is characterized more by its staunch refusal to follow rigidly *any* dogmas of law or authority, not just its rebellion against “Puritanical” ones. It is “a contradiction to canonical social power” (Howe, *TB* 1), including also those avant-garde powers—schools of thought or movements—that might dictate a certain kind of rationalist skepticism or a certain law of experimental form. Howe's antinomian poetics asserts its freedom from all such authorities. She uncompromisingly follows her own course of “writing as a physical event of immediate revelation” (1), hunting through historical records, archives,

speculative thought, and personal memory for meaningful signs, then creating signs of her own in response (rendered in page- and book-form).

Howe's poetic constructions are works of assiduous verbal investigation. They are as faithful as they are skeptical; they privilege and revel in material language, but their materiality (of form, sound, and textual make-up) exudes metaphysical significance; their singular forms of smallness bear pleasures, obscurities, and revelations that seem both physical and also spiritual.

‘ ‘ ‘

In *My Emily Dickinson*, Howe neatly summarizes the aspect of early-American Typology for which she has strong affinities: "Puritan theology at its best would tirelessly search God's secrecy, explore Nature's hidden meanings" (*MED* 46). Of course Howe's own work is not primarily theological, but she does share the practice of tirelessly searching out what is hidden or secret, reaching for difficult, suppressed, or overlooked meanings.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis explains this latter-day sign-work of Howe's in the same terms. Her writing involves a rigorous inquiry into signs, that is, "deeply felt markings, signs seen under pressure, signs in the typological sense"; her writing "does spiritual and metaphysical work yet without the authoritarian or prophetic claims that often accompany this practice" ("Howe" 126). And it is along these very lines that DuPlessis makes a comparison to Oppen, one that complements Davidson's in "Palimpsests." Howe's practice echoes

[t]hat practice of Oppen which speaks of the lengthy preliminary work done to find one word creating the small space to "stand on"...As in Oppen, Howe's work can show little interest in the connectedness of syntax, and more in the spaces of silence, the electricities of awe. (126)

Markings, tireless work, signs-under-pressure, hidden meanings, disconnected syntax, the creation of “small spaces,” electrified silences—these salient features of Howe’s poetry are at the very heart of what makes small poetry so persistently small. Her rigor of form and inquiry, her disjunctive poetics of compressed and fractured texts, bespeak not primarily linguistic skepticism but rather what Peter Quartermain calls Howe’s “reading of language as an emblematic collection of signs, potential meanings, abbreviations, wonders, and terrors to which she is subject rather than of which she is ‘master’” (*Disjunctive Poetics* 182-83).

### **Spelling Peirce: “A mere table of contents...a very snarl of twine”**

Howe’s radical investment in signs, as outlined above, makes it unsurprising that she would be drawn to a thinker like Charles Sanders Peirce. He was not a poet and his body of work is monstrous and sprawling, not at all dominated by small forms. Yet Peirce was possessed of something of the antinomian character;<sup>139</sup> he radically, obsessively forged new worlds of science, symbolic logic, and semiotics; and he vigorously upheld a concept of anti-positivist, staunchly empiricist yet almost mystical realism. These aspects, intensified by the promethean passion with which he pursued his often fragmented work and the obscurity that dogged him, create a distinct resonance with small poetics.

Susan Howe makes this kinship the implicit subject of her 1999 book *Pierce-Arrow*, and my entire consideration of that kinship in these pages proceeds from that book’s instigation. In

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<sup>139</sup> Joseph Brent, in his biography of Peirce, makes this connection, though he does so in reference to one very specific species of Antinomian and in a way that is rather unflattering to Peirce:

Believing himself incorrigible—like Baudelaire, who knowingly debauched himself, and like the Antinomians of the Reformations, who absolved themselves from God’s moral law because all was predestined—he acted as he wished, “indifferent of consequences.” And like his Puritan and Quaker ancestors, but with a different moral ideal, at the same time he devotedly and passionately pursued Truth in the company of the elect of the sacred congregations of science past, present, and future, in their countless generations. (338)

a brief prefatory note to the book, where she comments on the many facsimiles of Peirce's diagrams contained within, she muses: "Perhaps the Word, giving rise to all pictures and graphs, is at the center of Peirce's philosophy. There always was and always will be a secret affinity between symbolic logic and poetry" (ix).

The title Howe gives her book is an appropriation of the name of a now-defunct American car company, used as a deliberately "misspelled" pun: one of the symbols in formal logic that Peirce invented has come to be known as the "Peirce Arrow."<sup>140</sup> The way tiny shifts or similarities among signs like this—names and terms, in this case—can create suggestive convergences reflects Howe's orientation to the "secret affinities" she believes in, the method by which she attempts to "spell out" evocatively the significance of someone like Peirce. The book does not only concern him, but it is dominated by archival traces of Peirce's life and work—images and words excerpted from letters and manuscripts—which Howe weaves through the book, interacting with them and shaping or incorporating them into small poems. This book also marks the sharp, decisive turn in Howe's writing towards an almost exclusive use of smaller, rectangular "lattice-glyphs." The poems vary in size and proportion, but all follow this basic rubric of evenly spaced, page-centered groupings of lines.

Before addressing Howe's poems in this book and in those that follow, we should consider Peirce himself, in light of the questions Howe helps to bring forward: the philosopher's putative connections to antinomian and typological traditions, his humility and hesitancy, his realist convictions, and his general relevance to aesthetics and poetics.

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<sup>140</sup> The symbol, a simple downward pointing arrow,  $\downarrow$ , indicates a "neither...nor" situation, also known as a "logical nor." Statements centering on this symbol are true precisely when their constituent propositions are both false; thus, for example, one might write  $P \downarrow Q$  to show that something is true by virtue of  $P$  and  $Q$  each being proved false. The Wikipedia article on the subject adds this astonishing example of the application of this construction: "The computer used in the spacecraft that first carried humans to the moon, the Apollo Guidance Computer, was constructed entirely using NOR gates with three inputs" ("Logical NOR").

Peirce, like Emily Dickinson, has been misunderstood and slighted in various ways.

Howe offers a synopsis of the matter:

Scattered rumors and slanders (many of them continue to this day) variously represent American's great logician, the founder of pragmatism and one of the founders of mathematic, or symbolic, logic, as a decadent aesthete, a lecher, a liar, a libertine, queer, a wife beater, an alcoholic, a drug addict, a plagiarist, a wannabe robber baron; an unpractical pragmatist with suspect metaphysics. (*PA* 8)

Neither Howe nor I is interested in rhetorically rebutting these sort of slanders—Peirce was indeed a rather complicated and troubled man, in many ways—but he might be at least represented or “spelled out” more carefully and more fairly. Even some recent mentions of Peirce in connection to Susan Howe show evidence of the very kind of neglect to which her comment above is addressed. For example, poet and critic Charles Bernstein, in his foreword to Louis Zukofsky's collection of prose pieces *Prepositions+*, cites the pertinent cluster of proper nouns in this way:

Zukofsky's imaginative identification with Henry Adams has affinities with several other poets' extensively citational studies in American affinity, such as Susan Howe's C.S. Pierce [*sic*] (*Pierce-Arrow*, 1999) and Paul Metcalf's Herman Melville (*Genoa*, 1965). (xi)

Is this misspelling of Peirce's name a mere typo, an error introduced by an editor or printer?

Or does it stand just as Bernstein wrote it, betraying a degree of ignorance about the very thing he intends to affirm, Howe's study (in all of its careful, punning particularity)?<sup>141</sup> I do not think it suffices to dismiss this as mere accident or sloppiness. The misspelling of Peirce's name in a

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<sup>141</sup> The title denotes the now defunct American auto-manufacturer, but of course it is meant to connote (or conjure) Peirce's name, as well as the “Peirce Arrow” symbol he introduced (see my note above for a brief explanation).

highly pertinent and formal venue like this, or in any other such forum, is symptomatic of a more abiding and general “misspelling” of his significance, a negligence that amounts to a downplaying of Peirce’s importance.

There is an additional irony in this case, a rather striking one. Bernstein emphasizes Zukofsky’s scrupulous engagement with language, signs, meaning, particularity, epistemology, and reality; yet while he mentions Kant, Benjamin, Marx, Wittgenstein, and Laura Riding in connection to these issues, he shows no awareness that Zukofsky himself had also read, cited, and affirmed Peirce. Barry Ahearn, in his study of “A”, notes that “Charles Sanders Peirce was one of [Zukofsky’s] intellectual heroes” (188). And Zukofsky’s celebrated book *Bottom: On Shakespeare*, his longest and most philosophically complex prose work, devotes approximately six full pages to selected excerpts from Peirce’s writing on the very issues listed above. The first citation occurs just following a meditation on how looking and speaking operate as modes, or logics, through which metaphysical things—“love...religion, piety, or honesty”—are incorporated into a life, how they are, in a sense, *realized*. Zukofsky engages Wittgenstein’s thought, quotes Spinoza on “the idea of God” and the aforementioned virtues, then turns to Peirce: “A dozen years before Wittgenstein and writing after (or perhaps via) Spinoza and Boole, Charles Sanders Peirce thinks the ‘same’ or ‘similar’ thought” (90). The passage that immediately follows, Peirce’s “thought” in question, is a rather lengthy one explaining that “contemplation and study of the physico-psychical universe can imbue a man with principles of conduct analogous to the influence of a great man’s works or conversation,” and that “that analogue of a mind” is what a Pragmatist “means by ‘God’” (qtd. in Zukofsky 90).

The five-page collage of quotations that comes into the book later covers a wide spectrum of Peirce’s thought on signs and epistemology and then concludes with this rejoinder

to William James (in particular to his notion of truth), taken from a letter Peirce wrote to his friend: “What is utility if it is confined to a single person? Truth is public” (259). Clearly there are vital connections between Peirce and Zukofsky, and, by extension, between Peirce and all those Zukofsky influenced. None of these connections noted, much less explored, in Bernstein’s otherwise thorough foreword; furthermore, this “intellectual hero” of Zukofsky’s finds his name misspelled. This oversight could owe in part to the metaphysical cast of Zukofsky’s dialogue with Peirce, which does not at all accord with the avant-garde’s retroactive championing of the poet as an anti-realist, “machines-made-of-words” modernist. In any case, the error and the omission indicate a fundamental lack of awareness, and they also tacitly communicate the message that Peirce isn’t really of central significance, to Zukofsky or to poetics in general.

More recently, even if Peirce is not disparaged or dismissed outright in the ways Howe lists (as, for example, a lecher, libertine, or queer), one is liable to hear recurring complaints that his work is arcane to the point of impenetrability, too scattered to engage, too contradictory or confusing, and that he is a “bad” writer. These responses also are vital to Howe’s Peirce. All such views, especially the latter one, owe a great deal to the measuring of Peirce alongside his friend William James. Though it was Peirce who initially formulated pragmatism, James popularized it (or rather, his own version of it) in the eloquent and justly celebrated lectures he delivered and also published throughout his life. Simply put, James, the psychologist-philosopher and a true descendent of Emerson, was indeed a much better writer than Peirce; his brilliance found purchase in a host of lectures and completed books that spoke influentially to several arenas at once. Conversely, Peirce the polymath scientist-philosopher labored for decades on hundreds of projects but always struggled to make a living, gain hearing, obtain an

academic post, and complete publishable book-length manuscripts. This linkage of Peirce to James, an incongruent mirroring by which Peirce always emerges seeming messy and too complicated to approach, is something Peirce himself was keenly conscious of, and it is central to grasping his importance to Susan Howe and small poetry.

Of course there is no reason that the differences between Peirce and James ought to necessitate a choice of one over the other, and certainly no reason that Peirce's standing should suffer so much by the "inevitable" comparison. They are complementary figures, each a sort of giant in his own right. Alfred North Whitehead declares plainly that "the effective founders of the American Renaissance are Charles Peirce and William James. Of these men, W.J. is the analogue to Plato, and C.P. to Aristotle" (qtd. in Sebeok 60). And Bertrand Russell says of Peirce: "beyond doubt...he was one of the most original minds of the later nineteenth century, and certainly the greatest American thinker ever" (*Wisdom of the West* 276).

The fascinating thing about Peirce's view of himself, his estimation of his own significance, is how conflicted it is. He approached his various scientific and philosophical projects with an enormous zeal and ambition; he doggedly sought to create an architectonic set of ideas that would make sense of a post-Darwinian world in all its facets, and boldly (some thought arrogantly) hoped to accomplish the task. Yet in striking counterpoint to that confidence, he had a surprising streak of discouragement and self-laceration.

In one letter, he confesses, "I have always labored under the misfortune of being thought 'original'...my mental left-handedness makes me express myself in a way that to a normal mind seems almost inconceivably awkward" (letter, 1908, qtd. in Brent 329). Elsewhere he speaks of his "incapacity for linguistic expression" (MS 632, qtd. in Brent 44), even though he wrote thousands upon thousands of pages of well-received reviews, lectures, letters, essays, and

treatises. (Peirce's writing style is even affirmed by two award-winning poets of the twentieth century, Randall Jarell<sup>142</sup> and, in a composition textbook, Donald Hall). Peirce goes even further, announcing "that I am by nature most inaccurate, that I am quite exceptional for almost complete deficiency of imaginative power" (qtd. in Brent 323). And perhaps the most telling and most poignant comment of all candidly betrays Peirce's sense of inferiority in relation to James: "[James] so concrete, so living; I a mere table of contents, so abstract, *a very snarl of twine*"<sup>143</sup> (*CP* 6.184, emphasis added). These more defeated self-judgments are occasionally complemented by more sober ones, where pride and humility are commingled. Late in his life, Peirce writes:

whatever I amount to is due to two things, first, a perseverance like that of a wasp in a bottle & 2<sup>nd</sup> to the happy accident that I early on hit upon a METHOD of thinking, which any intelligent person could master....Add to the elements of whatever success I have had that I have [been] always unceasingly exercising my power of *learning new tricks*—to keep myself in possession of the childish *trait* as long as possible. That is an immense thing. (qtd. in Brent 323-24, author's emphasis).

It is remarkable that instead of expressing any sense of his own greatness or of any definite achievements, the philosopher here instead takes pride in his mere perseverance and in his "childish" capacity continually to "learn new tricks"; even his founding of pragmatism (the "METHOD" in question) is diminished to a "happy accident."

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<sup>142</sup> "An introduction to [the selected poems of W.C. Williams] can be useful to the reader in the way that an introduction to Peirce or William James can be: the reader is entering a realm that has some of the confusion and richness of the world...most readers will automatically make any adjustments they need to make for writers as outspoken, warm-hearted, and largely generous as Peirce and James and Williams. Their voices are introduction enough" (Randall Jarrell, *Poetry and the Age* 215).

<sup>143</sup> Howe cites this statement of Peirce's in her book *The Midnight*, though the version she includes (which was used as an epigraph to an essay on the editing of Peirce's manuscripts) elides the James context. The line is abbreviated and slightly changed to "I am a mere table of contents...a very snarl of twine" (146).

These powerful contradictions in Peirce—someone bent, in an almost Promethean spirit, on fathoming the very universe but who was also deeply afflicted with his own *awkwardness*, his “almost complete deficiency of imaginative power”—are at the root of what compels Susan Howe’s and my own engagement with him. A “wasp in a bottle” and a “snarl of twine” are, after all, strikingly poetic self-conceptions. These images might have been borrowed from Emily Dickinson, and more generally connote the typological and antinomian tendencies in Peirce. Also, both images might be considered apt figures for small poetry in how they conceive something small, mundane, and contained as charged with energy—tangled, perhaps trapped or forgotten, but *buzzing*, *snarling*. If the images directly communicate self-abnegation, they also carry an undertone of defiance. In Peirce a keen sensitivity to limitation is inextricably amalgamated to unyielding perseverance and a commitment to improvisation, to “learning new tricks.” Such *tenacious humility* is one of the most salient traits in each of the small poets I have considered (Niedecker, Oppen, and Howe) and it pertains just as strongly to the poets I shall address in my concluding chapter (Myung Mi Kim, Rae Armantrout, Yuko Otomo, and Laura Sims). Even though, as Peirce plainly shows, this disposition—which is also a mode, practice, and motivating force—does not necessarily result in small artworks, it does correspond to the prevalence of spare, enigmatic text-forms and the affinity for silence and reserve one finds in small poets.

In any case, Peirce was not at all a “mere table of contents.” His tenacity made for groundbreaking work in various realms but especially in the realm of semiotics, which he saw as the thing that unified all of this thinking. His prodigious contribution to thinking about signs makes Peirce not only “original” or “great” in a general way (as Russell says) but prominently located within a particular trend in thinking, the same one, in its poetic branchings, to which

Howe belongs. Thomas Sebeok, in *Semiotics in the United States*, cites two compelling references to this lineage. Philosopher David Savan, Sebeok notes, studies “The prominence which American thinkers gave to the conceptions of signs, symbols, and emblems, representations, counterparts, and the way these concepts are either analyzed or used, especially in their connection with action and practice” (7). This pragmatic-semiotic strain is a key context within which Peirce should be read, Savan argues:

I showed (to my own satisfaction) that from Jonathan Edwards on through Emerson, Judge Stallo, Johnson, Chauncey Wright, et alii, there was a strong concern with signs, evidence and evidences, representation and representatives, and the connection of all this with action. So that Peirce’s semiotic is not a creation ex nihilo but can be seen as the culmination of 120 years of development, a historic peak sloping down on its hither side, rather gently through James and Royce and Lewis and Morris, and now rising again. (qtd. in Sebeok 7)

The correspondence between Peirce and Edwards is especially noteworthy here, given Edwards’ radicalizing of typology, and the deep, abiding interest that Howe has shown in the Puritan minister. David Conkin, in *Puritans and Pragmatists*, sketches the parallel more fully:

Peirce had the ambition and many of the intellectual attributes of Jonathan Edwards. In New England, he was Edwards’ first real successor, the first to reason so exactly, to probe so deeply, to seek such a complete, all embracing system of philosophy. Like Edwards, [Peirce] sought a vast, architectonic structure, encompassing all knowledge, perfectly unifying religion and science, and explaining everything, past and future. (qtd. in Sebeok 7-8)

The resemblance Conkin notes points to Peirce’s massiveness—his compulsion to encompass, unify, and explain “all knowledge,” “everything,” in a “vast” manner—not his obscurity or any putative antinomian demurral. To be sure, Peirce is no sort of exemplar of smallness, but his obsessive, independent, troubled but self-assured searching out of the complexities of signs and significances put him squarely on the side of small poetry.

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Peirce is usually discussed in terms of pragmatism, logic, or in connection to a few isolated words from his semiotics (icon, index, and symbol are the most popular). He is almost never discussed in relation to art or poetry. Susan Howe, and the several sources arrayed above, I hope, help to demonstrate that beyond “a secrete affinity between symbolic logic and poetry” there is a vital affinity between Charles Sanders Peirce and the sort of small poetics exemplified by Howe herself.

### **Lattice-Glyphs**

In the latter phase of Howe’s career, she has taken on more and more vast and complex realms of historical, archival, personal, and philosophical material—the subject of Peirce (the unwieldy bundle of his life, papers, and thought) is a representative of this expanded scope—her poems have become more and more simplified in form. In terms of content and import, the scale has broadened and the referential range of the language risks disorder in its sheer volume and complexity; yet, as through a law of inverse proportionality, Howe’s text-forms, at least visually, have become more meticulously *small*-scaled and *ordered*. *Peirce-Arrow*, *The Midnight*, and *Souls of the Labadie Tract* are dominated by slight, box-like swatches of text, each one evenly lined

and spaced and carefully centered on its page. Here is one of the *The Midnight's* typical poems, drawn from a section called “Bed Hangings I”:

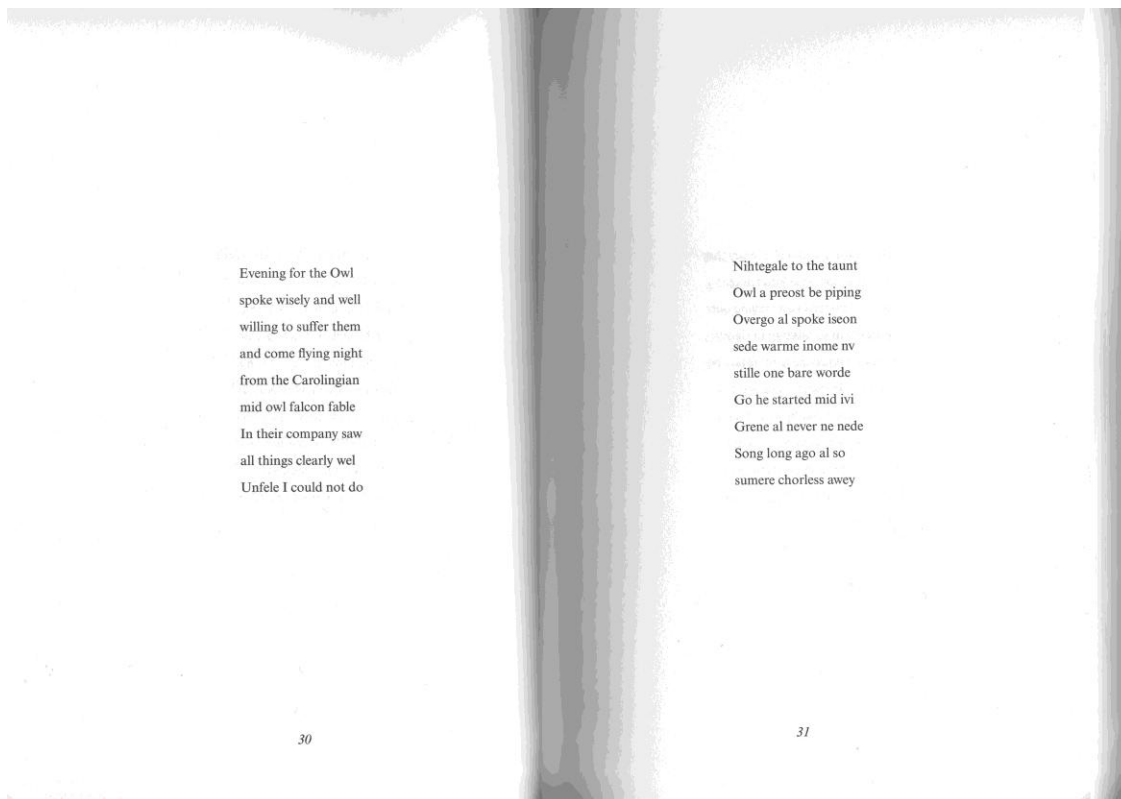
Nor hemp to pleasure pillow  
 Nor clay scorn to cover as if  
 sphere of the pent lake hold  
 Infold me bird and briar you  
 fathom we cannot to another  
 declare character in written  
 summit granite cramp marble  
 Simple except a blank that it (11)

These poems at first suggest a plainness or constraint within a formal law. Upon reading the disjunctive but musical lines, though, one finds that in fact the texts are tense, coiled, a bit wild, and incantory—compressed consolidations of Howe’s small poetics. Like her typographically shattered or splayed texts, these too are “splintered sketches of sound,” poems whose dense semiotic textures conjure urgent realities and violences even as they break into those forces with intimative, associative possibilities of meaning packed into spaces of enlivened quiet, dense moments of textual reverie.

Susan Howe has always paid scrupulous attention to deploying spare texts onto discrete page-fields, and these texts have always included or intimated violence, often in the protean way that lines or words were arranged on pages. Her books from the 1970s and ‘80s (*The Western Borders*, *The Secret History of the Dividing Line*, and *The Nonconformist’s Memorial*, for example) contain poems whose embodiments from page to page seem to evolve, continually squirming and moving and fluctuating. The forms are ever-spare but ever-shifting, evoking a free-verse effect

similar to that found in much of Oppen's and Niedecker's writings: the sense of a compelling menagerie of subtly distinct forms, each one's shape and line-breaks determined by the necessities arising in successive moments of composition.

All of Howe's forms, however constructed, have served as vehicles for her severely yet elegantly arrayed language. But, increasingly, through *Peirce-Arrow* (1999), *The Midnight* (2004) and *Souls of the Labadie Tract* (2007), Howe has rendered her signature collages in the form of exceptionally small rectangular grids or stacks of lines like the one above—some almost squarish, some making narrow columns; some with stanza breaks, but most without; all of them free of punctuation, save the occasional dash; and all placed precisely in the center of ample surrounding page-spaces. Thus to hold one of these books open at almost any point is to be faced by a pair of contracted, unflinching forms that echo exactly each other's shape, location, and framing envelope of space:



(PA 30-31)

Though one might be first tempted to call these forms block- or box-like (which they certainly are), we would do better to call them “lattice-glyphs”; they emphatically foreground a compact framework concept that seems to undergird every poem, but the unremitting recurrence of the forms and the complexity with which words are woven around each spectral frame invests them with an emblematic, or glyph-like, significance. Here is one such lattice-glyph from *Peirce-Arrow*, to complement those from *Souls of the Labadie Tract* and *The Midnight* included above:

Constraint is a secondness  
 swimming out to sea Europe  
 Between an interpretant and  
 its object in playspace the  
 heart’s free interim Macbeth’s  
 crude sacrilege deeper even  
 Spent those last years not  
 writing his paper on misery  
 I remember all the time now  
 remember the brood the fret (25)

At first glance, a poem like this seems completely disparate to the jagged assemblages in Niedecker’s *Homemade Poems* and Oppen’s *Discrete Series* or the aerated, left-aligned stanzas of Oppen’s *The Materials*. Howe’s lattice-glyphs, unlike the other texts, are small poems constructed according to a rather strict template, forms that exude *procedural* precision more strongly than shape-shifting and free-flowing *serial* openness (to invoke Joseph Conte’s oft-cited taxonomic terms).

Critics have not yet directly acknowledged this trend in Howe. There have been no efforts to account for what amounts to a full-fledged gravitation toward a rather strict textual formalism. What does this trend indicate or mean, especially considered in the light of her prior proclivity toward more visually stunning, distressed collages? Has Howe abandoned a radical practice for a resigned one? No; the case is quite the opposite. Her recent books do not show Howe “settling down” or a changing in any real way, but rather settling *into* a mode that best consolidates her various abiding commitments. Page-centered lattice-glyphs most effectively convey the dialectical (yet defiantly un-resolved and un-synthesized) elements, one might even call them antinomies,<sup>144</sup> of Howe’s poetics: her tense blends of violence and peace, noise and silence, found words and invented language, damaged realities and recuperative construction.

Through the above hypothesis, one can envisage the stunning, wilder assemblages of Howe’s earlier works not as parts of a separate, more radical mode of writing, but as potent representations or emblems of her poetic investments. Even better, they might be thought of as *allegories* of how language exists (or “behaves,” per its habits) in any particular mind or place, thus any particular poem. The poems like those pictured above from “Thorow” or the texts of *Eikon Basilike*, are instructive, necessary works—their wreckage is both viscerally and cerebrally significant—but Howe’s elected forms in her recent books suggest that small, centered, rectilinear poems are ultimately the more significant emblematic vehicle for her poetics, the text-form that most accords with her concerns and most effectively figures the verbal material she arranges.

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<sup>144</sup> Antinomies are simply elements, or even mere words, that appear to be irreconcilable opposites. It is a philosophical term (incorporated heavily into Kant’s writing, for instance), and although it has no direct connection to historical Antinomianism—where the “anti” indicates opposition to or errancy from “the Law,” “nomian”—there is of course some continuity between the terms, insofar as they both pertain to the contradictions and strains inherent to *naming*.

In *Pierce-Arrow*, as the poem above bears witness, much of this arranged material or content is drawn from Peirce's writings and from writings about him. There are poems mentioning firstness and secondness; fallibilism and icons and nominalism; persons, events, and anecdotal details. Yet all of these citations are wound, together with other language, around a given lattice framework, and all marks of distinction or authorship or even grammatical partition haven been stripped away, withheld. The reader is forced to read slowly, scrupulously, forced to parse the phrases as seems right—according to sound, association, or sense. The lattice quality entails the thorough meshing together of Howe's voice with Peirce's and with the other figures in the book:

Blind flight do we win  
 at last trusting to mad  
 strife in blindness not  
 holding to be mortal in  
 afterlife with arrows to  
 pierce dust and surf who  
 can discern or declare  
 What is due from guest  
 to host—*A Nympholept* (PA 104).

Who is uttering what at each turn in this poem? “Blind flight” and “mad / strife” bring to mind Peirce's ideas about chance and the “brute force” of secondness, and the syntax, though broken, suggests speech. But “with arrows to / pierce dust and surf” is a vivid poetic image that seems to come from Howe herself or from elsewhere. The last lines, citing a guest-host relation, in particular the question of a guest's obligations, arise abruptly, with no apparent connection to the preceding content. And the final term, conspicuous in capitals and italics, alludes to a poem by Algernon Charles Swinburne. The outmoded term indicates an enthusiastic, perhaps

daemonic, frenzy of some kind, and so correlates to the earlier lines “mad / strife in blindness.” In these meshed voices and references, what the poem offers is are not thoughts on Peirce or Swinburne or even definite details we could attribute to either of them, but an evocative and prosodically rich composite of words (the *i* and *o* vowels; the *-st* and *-f* slant rhymes; the recurring *s*, *r*, *t*, and *l* consonants; and the sprung-rhythm stresses throughout), shaped into a discrete and solid-looking textual entity. We might tend to describe poems like those in *Pierce-Arrow* as consisting of Susan Howe’s poetic voice haunted by Peirce’s (and others’) voices, but the inverse view is just as viable here: the texts are the archive-engendered voices of the dead, haunted by the conjuring, writing “voice” of Howe’s hands.

Thus *Pierce-Arrow*’s material or content is revealed to be, primarily, not ideas or information but verbal material itself. In inquiring deeply of Peirce, entering the wild forest of his archive and then writing *of* him, trying to read him but also trying to take on his spirit in some way, Howe turns to a very particular form of indexing and icon-making. Nevertheless, Howe’s lattice-glyphs do not abandon the fundamental symbolic values of words, that is, the operation of thirdness whereby words, as part of some system, stand for shared references. In the above poem, “Blind” clearly intends to denote an inability to see well or at all, “flight” to refer to some sort of rapid journeying, perhaps through the air, and “Blind flight” to call to mind some such trek that involves some ignorance of direction or navigation. For the most part, Howe’s recent poems tend to use words as words. The elements themselves retain their basic semiotic values as symbolic signs—legible semantics and syntaxes abound in Howe’s lattice-glyph poems, albeit usually in piecemeal and trace form—but these are not turned toward discursive, statement-making ends.

Each poem, instead of communicating a clear meaning or set of meanings and instead of clearly delineating a speaking voice or voices (both operations of thirdness, where some paraphrase or code could be substituted) is a patchwork of indexical signs that point and gesture in many directions at once. Existing or formerly existing things and persons and voices are cited, the reader's attention is called to them, but their meanings, locations, and boundaries are blurred. Like other sign-operations of secondness, and like the "Index" apparatus at the back of many books, these poems' lines emphasize metonymic relations—"real connections" (Peirce *EP* 2:460)—of proximity, contiguity, association, correlation, and representative partiality, instead of providing cohesive threads of information. Howe even makes this connection explicit by constructing one poem in the book entirely out of excerpted items from the actual index of some book:

Slaves fugitive 38 50 51 Sleep  
 Solar system Suicide Suffrage  
 the powers that hem us in 169  
 Sharp turn deep descent Mental  
 photograph 299 Memorial Hall  
 dedication of 267 Memory 124  
 201 265-267 321 347 Morality  
 Moral sense 91-94 Mother Goose  
 the philosophy of 39 39*n* 294  
 Mathematics Wright's study of  
 15 23 28 45 254 356 363*n* (*PA* 67)

In both *Pierce-Arrow* and *The Midnight*, Howe cites Emerson's provocative assertion, in "The Poet," that "Bare lists of words are found suggestive, to an imaginative and excited mind" (in *PA* 14; *TM* 46). But Howe's lattice-glyphs are more than just "bare lists." Like the index-

collage above, her poems are scrupulously curated and shaped. The poems are not really bare or lacking in references, images, or inflection; if anything, they are *saturated* with these significations, such that they become what Rachel Blau DuPlessis calls “matted palimpsests” (“Howe” 126). DuPlessis used this term in the mid to late 1980s, well before Howe’s turn to lattice-glyphs, but the term precisely suits the way these texts weave and compress their elements together. Thus, through form, by building her texts as small, congruent, repeating structures, her groupings of indexical signs become *iconic*.

In Peirce’s thinking, icons are “diagrammatic signs,” signs that “serve to represent their objects only in so far as they resemble them in themselves” (*Writings* 523, *EP* 2.460). Significantly, the “resemblance” is rooted in the sign itself, not in the object represented. Peirce writes that an icon “is a sign fit to be used as such because it *possesses* the quality signified” (*EP* 2.307, emphasis added); and he further stresses this internal, immediate, gestalt character of icon-signs themselves in a longer passage:

An icon is a representamen of what it represents and for the mind that interprets it as such, by virtue of its being *an immediate image*, that is to say by virtue of characters which belong to it in itself as a sensible object, and which it would possess just the same were there no object in nature that it resembled, and though it never were interpreted as a sign. (*CP* 447, emphasis added)

Obviously the poems I call lattice-glyphs are not signs that explicitly signify certain objects or qualities. But their form and scale are both salient and suggestive—every poem is a small, filled-out rectangle in the center of a page. They signify small, portable objects because they “possess” these same qualities; they signify rooms because they are shaped and enclosed like them; they signify composite wholes with viable metonymic tensions because they are such piecemeal,

“matted” text-forms; they signify a violent world through their internal fractures and also through the recalcitrance to violence implicit in their crafted, compact physicality.

A reader facing page after page of Howe’s lattice-glyphs cannot help but be struck by each form for its status as “an immediate image,” a concrete, existent form—that is, a sign—whose “characters which belong to it in itself as a sensible object” are powerfully evocative. They are held in the center of each page as a hand might hold any small, curious thing; moreover, every such text is actually small enough that it *would* fit into one’s palm, or *does* fit, we should say.

Thus, at least “to an imaginative and excited mind” (Emerson), Howe’s little lattices of meshed indexical signs are ultimately glyphs, emblems, icons of all things that are or that seem diminutive, plain-looking, or insignificant. Avid, careful attention reveals such things to be, in fact, complex conjunctions of the intimate and the enigmatic, the durable and the vulnerable, the fictive and the real.

Howe achieves this transmutation by means of certain straightforward but fairly radical techniques which bear delineating. As I have tried to emphasize, the poetics that pertain to the lattice-glyphs do not entail any changing of Howe’s abiding techniques but rather a distillation, an intensification, of them. Her texts are still spare, still allusive, still disjunctive, still constructed as groups of broken limb-lines presented in page-fields, but they have been here harnessed, as it were, into boxes: curious, discrete instances. The harnessing is most remarkable about these forms. By choosing to shape her poems as boxes or lattices, Howe staunchly *refuses* to pursue any other kinds of shaping. In effect she *renounces* or forfeits the experimental doctrines that drive toward the movement and drama, the freewheeling openness, of arrayed and restlessly shape-shifting texts. These poems are not projected over and down the page (as,

indeed, are some of Howe's earlier poems); they are not "graphs of thought," but dense, carved, variegated lumps of thought, lodged in housings. Therefore this small poetry does constitute a sort of minimalism; the blocks of text, isolated and fastened firmly within their page-frames, appear, in a sense, as abstracted forms, evocative analogues of the paintings of Agnes Martin or Ad Reinhardt, both of whom Howe has admired since her own days of painting.

Howe's lattice-glyphs embrace restriction and outward similarity in order to deepen subtle, internal differences. Each poem is restricted to an approximate length and width and a rigid rule of line-spacing (approximately one-and-a-half spaces between each); and most significantly, every line of a given text is restricted by the length of the ones preceding it. It is clear that we cannot separate the line breaks in Howe's lattice-glyphs from the line *lengths*. Some of the texts appear almost perfectly rectangular, including their right edge, as if Howe were using "justified" spacing, but she is not.

Maple of casepiece pine of clock  
 a scaleless lyric Thanatos pattern  
 Come free yourself an authorial  
 voice echoes it is not comic to be  
 tragic people have been trying to  
 come down tangible form we hear  
 the bell but there is no handiwork  
 Trade we have nothing porcelain (TM 95)

The total form here instead attests to just how meticulously Howe must mold and tweak and *work* each line so that it suits both her textual and verbal objectives. Whether in the moment of writing or later, during sculptural revision, these texts are *cropped* into shape. Housing language in this way, ordering it so strictly in space, both constrains and loosens it. The work of shaping and stacking so that they look similar and balanced necessarily engenders jumps, elisions, and of

course enjambments in the poem. This meticulous use of disjunction, combined with the clearing away of punctuation, makes the lattice-glyphs, which are in one sense very *determined* texts, suspended in tense ambiguities and indeterminacies. I do not mean to invoke the glib notion that certain experimental language reveals the arbitrariness of all signs and thus announces ultimate indeterminacy, that is, the illusion of knowledge and reality. That is far from Howe's poetics, even inimical to it. Like other small poets, her orientation to language and reality is skeptical and assiduously inquiring but not, finally, pessimistic. Instead, the indeterminacies of Howe's poems are addressed to the reader, in invitation and good-faith challenge. The reader must actively work to bridge gaps, parse phrases, conjecture referents, and consider various possibilities of meaning that emerge. Knowledge, memory, history, and language all tend to exist as scraps and slips in experience, but in constructing her rigorous indexical-iconic forms, Howe transmutes would-be detritus into legible objects and presents them to readers. The ingenuousness of the address occasionally surfaces in an actual poem, as in the opening half of this poem from *Pierce-Arrow*:

Please indifferent reader you  
 into whose hands this book  
 may fall without hope already  
 drawn to essays even so  
 light a sketch of character life (PA 119)

The lattice-glyph templates are vehicles, radical enclosures that bear witness to instabilities but offer stable, definite sites where readers can face and negotiate these instabilities. This deeply textual and reader-oriented approach to making poems is what sets Howe's lattice-glyphs apart as such consummately dialectical small poems.

Like all of Howe's poems, these too evince damage and difficulty, even though their outermost appearance initially suggests block-like integrity and durability. The still-looking forms are rhythmic, reassuring, quiet. In reading and then re-reading them, a reader experiences in their calm, small, page-centered repetition a pulse-like rhythm. She quickly becomes acquainted, knowing that from page to page, as each is turned, a definite sequence of these congruent small poems will unfold. And yet to enter one of the lattice-glyphs, to read and reread it, is to slip into a small space that *disorients*, a tiny moment alive with scabrous surfaces and clamoring, half-coherent whispers. Each poem discomfits without ever confounding the reader. Howe's rigorous approach to textual form, her self-restriction to a relatively simple, quiet template, in effect contains or counterpoints the *noise*, the haunting voices and insinuations, of each poem's actual words, in all their interwoven syntactical and semantic energy.

Howe succinctly captures this complex of lattice-glyph effects in an essay from 2007: "A sonic grid of homely minutiae fallen away into posterity carries trace filaments. Tumbled syllables are bolts and bullets from the blue" (*SLT* 13).

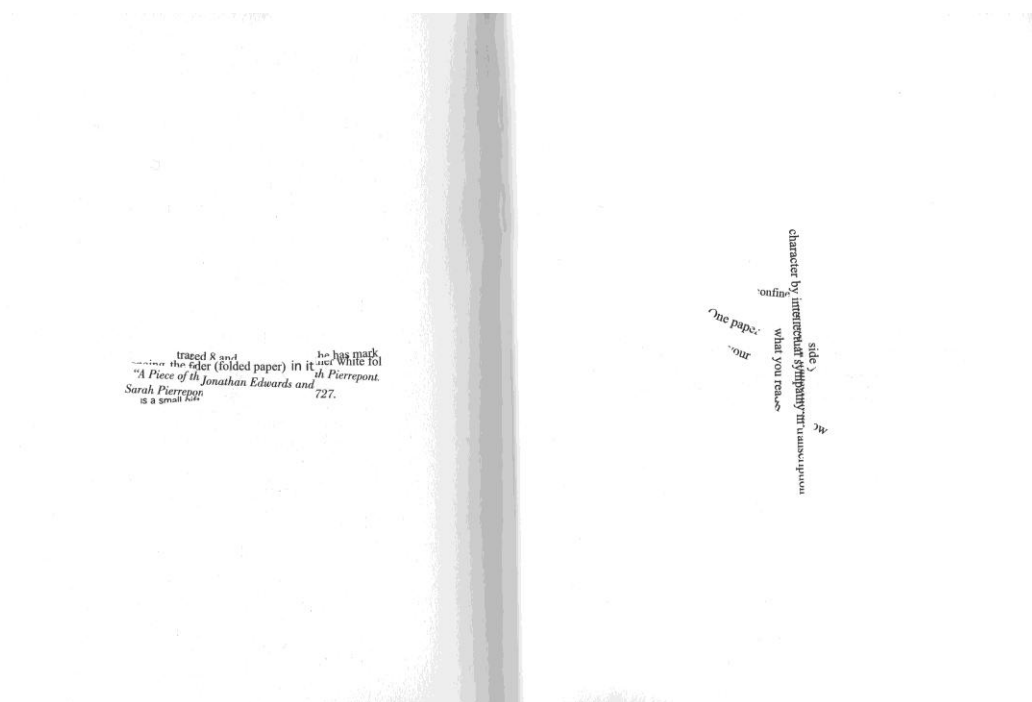
Implicitly, the statement is addressed to the sort of ephemeral, nearly forgotten archival documents Howe seeks out and studies, but it also serves as an annotation of her own "sonic grid"-making. The picture here of "homely minutiae" that are also "bolts and bullets," of "trace filaments" that morph, in an instant, into "tumbled syllables," captures the charged antinomian dialectics that animate Howe's recent poems.

### ***Souls of the Labadie Tract***

The small-poem thesis above comes from Howe's most recent book, *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, a work that might be justly called a culmination and a crystallization of Howe's poetics to

date. It might also be read as a textbook for small poetry itself, as a categorical approach. This is due to several factors. First, the book begins with a sort of preface, a brief essay called “Personal History” in which Howe reflects on her own writing practice and in so doing brings forth some powerful, aphoristic articulations of how nearly all small poems work. The statement above comes from this opening essay. Then, the crux of the matter: the poems in the book are the most persistently small of Howe’s oeuvre—page after page of tiny rectangular texts, all between five and eight lines. Finally, the book has a sort of experimental coda that complements the prose and the central body of poems.

*Souls* ends with a thirteen-page series of discrete typological collages, harking back to some of Howe’s earlier text-making practices. These, though, are much smaller, more clustered assemblages than those earlier ones, and here the language is more visibly affected by forces of “outward clash.” The printed words not only overlap each other and lie scattered in several positions, as they do in *Eikon Basilike*, for example, but they are palpably damaged; the constituent words and phrases, in varying typefaces, are deteriorated, distorted, and cut into:



(SLT 114-15)

As visual poems, these are “significant little wrecks” par excellence, and they both signal the continuity between Howe’s early and late work while ultimately coming down on the side of an ever-more-acute smallness. These figure something that is true throughout *Souls of the Labadie Tract*—an awareness of the page as small-poem housing is perhaps more heightened than ever before in Howe’s work. The book has less prose than her other books of lattice glyphs, no interpolated images, and the smallest texts she has yet constructed. The tiny lattice-glyphs here—and the glowing white space that surrounds them—dominate the book. Thus they become even more charged, more insistent, in the way they recur, page after page: subtle variations catch the eye and mind, but *every* piece is so strikingly small and so intimately familiar and cryptic and prosodically textured in its murmurings that the work takes on (oxymoronically, one might say) a tour-de-force character. The book thus embodies one of the crucial paradoxes of small poetry: in *Souls*, tiny, prosaic-looking blocks of text—transient little scraps sitting quietly in empty space—have a unique way of *arresting* and *galvanizing* the reader’s attention.

The title of Susan Howe’s most recent book of poems comes from a group of Dutch “Labadists,” a quietest sect named after a Jean de Labadie, a French separatist. This group emigrated to the North American continent in 1684 and settled on 3,750 acres of land, known as the “Labadie Tract,” in north-east Maryland. In 1722 “the community dissolved,” and several years later, no signs of the group’s former presence remained. Howe reports the sect’s central tenets:

Labadists believed in, among other things, the necessity of inner illumination, diligence and contemplative reflection. Marriage was renounced. They held all

property in common (including children) and supported themselves by manual labor and commerce. (24)

It is not surprising that Howe would have a strong affinity for this all-but-forgotten group of contemplatives in their exile and historical transience. Their commitments and their errand were emphatically antinomian; they are the sort of buried souls Howe is ever intent on exhuming.

The book complements this engagement of the Labadists with a motif, centered around Jonathan Edwards and Wallace Stevens, of fabric and scraps of paper. *Souls of the Labadie Tract* begins with an epigraph quote from each writer, both concerning a typology of silk-worms and garment-making. Each of the book's two sequences of small poems is prefaced by a prose piece called "*Errand*"; these tell, respectively, of Edwards' and Stevens' analogous habits of using "small pieces of paper" (9) or "scraps" (9, 73) to abet their thinking. Edwards, while journeying alone on horseback, would pin these pieces to his clothes for each idea that occurred to him as he travelled ("fixing in his mind an association between the location of the paper and the particular insight"[9]). Stevens, while walking to work alone or during his lunch break, would jot down ideas and phrases onto "two-by-four-inch scraps he carried in his pocket," and the jottings would later be compiled and shaped into poetic lines (73). Finally, *Souls* ends with a brief section of textual collages, discussed above, called "Fragment of the Wedding Dress of Sarah Pierpont Edwards" (Jonathan Edwards' wife). That sequence begins with an image of a small scrap of fabric, set in the center of a blank page. The acknowledgements explain that this is in fact a scanned image of the actual object indicated by the title.



(SLT 112)

*Souls of the Labadie Tract* is a crystallization of Susan Howe's small poetics; the situation of the Labadists and the typologically suggestive attention to scraps serve as its perfectly appointed central veins. The latter element, in particular, brings together a figure and a practice that have run through Howe's entire career. Edwards' mnemonic ritual and Stevens' mischievous, workaday bricolage are joined by one of Emily Dickinson's text-making methods. In *The Birthmark*, Howe quotes Ralph Franklin on the nineteenth-century master: "She reverted to pinning slips to sheets to maintain the proper association"<sup>145</sup> We see, in all of these cases, a strikingly totemic or talismanic quality that persists within an eminently pragmatic activity. Such

<sup>145</sup> This is a good place to note another connection Howe makes between Edwards and Dickinson:

I say that Emily Dickinson took both his legend and his learning, tore them free from his own humorlessness and the dead weight of doctrinaire Calvinism, then applied the freshness of his perception to the dead weight of American poetry as she knew it (*MED* 51).

things, of course, are not only interesting *to* Howe, they also thoroughly apply to her work as well. She also fashions her poetry from scraps and slips (the divergent double sense of this latter word is especially pertinent). Going beyond these other writers, though, especially in *Souls*, Howe not only uses literal or figurative scraps as parts of the thinking and writing process, she builds completed texts that are themselves in the form of scraps and slips.

Her small poetry is riddled with a typology of these ephemeral but deeply significant pieces. The image of Sarah Edwards' dress fragment serves as an evocative emblem of any given single-page Howe poem, and it is an almost exact non-verbal shadow-form of every small lattice-glyph. Each one lies on the page in the same state: tattered but shaped, preserved, and carefully displayed. Here are two that lie across the book's gutter from each other (or lie together, face-to-face, when the book is closed):

Stern wars—each are all  
in the night here together  
Cloth and choir of slate

Hypothesis doesn't stop  
What each thought cost  
What barbarous claim

Larceny—you may protest  
in time you have the start  
on our old idols—Apostate

or some torn pieces of sixth  
sense at its most fragile in  
range of some others of us (56-57)

‘ ‘ ‘

In placing these small, recurring, scrap-like texts so conspicuously into the pages of a book, Howe negotiates a canny truce with the print medium itself, and in so doing challenges broader assumptions about language, reason, and progress. Walter Ong, in *Orality and Literacy*, lays out the basic significance of print as against language that is only spoken and heard:

Print encourages a sense of closure, a sense that what is found in a text has been finalized, has reached a state of completion...Print is curiously intolerant of physical incompleteness. It can convey the impression, unintentionally and subtly, but very really, that the material the text deals with is similarly complete or self-consistent. (133)

However just this summary may be in general, it is precisely this “sense of closure” that Susan Howe’s texts unsettle from within. She uses the *sense* of closure or completeness that obtain in printed texts—especially poetic texts like hers that are conspicuously formed and placed on the page—to counterpoint language whose syntax, meaning, and context are not at all closed or final. Howe both courts and subverts this effect of seeming closure—her small poems always seem to be simultaneously “self-consistent” as texts and yet also “incomplete” or in-process as language. It is the embedding of the latter sense within the former that is so powerful in Howe’s small poems. Michael Davidson captures this holistic incompleteness in his concept of the “palimtext”:

The palimtext is a kind of ruin that emerges in an era when ruins no longer signify lost plenitude...Textual self-referentiality—the modern equivalent of the baroque allegorist’s memento mori—becomes a recognition of transitoriness and ephemerality in a world committed to the illusion of progress and permanence.

(*Ghostlier Demarcations* 3)

This passage offers an incredibly incisive and persuasive reading of the significance of poems, like Howe’s, that are constructed from scraps and fragments and existing perhaps *as* a scrap. And indeed Davidson goes on to examine both George Oppen and Susan Howe as exemplary writers of palimtexts. In particular his idea of how such texts articulate a sort of emblematic

critique of rationalist mass culture accords precisely with my own argument about deliberately “wrecked” or “damaged” small poems (Adorno’s notion of “barbaric asceticism,” art whose harshness is a “repudiation of mass culture,” should be cited here once more, as Davidson’s ideas echo it so closely). The “fragmentary, metonymic” (79) physicality of Oppen’s and Howe’s texts do indeed bespeak a fragility and a transience that repudiate all reductive assumption of closure, completeness, propriety, or progress, in print or in culture. My own addition to this concept is to demonstrate central significance of scale itself, which Davidson never explicitly acknowledges. Certain palimpsests, like Howe’s poems in *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, are also radically spare and small:

Indifferent truth and trust  
am in you and of you air  
utterance blindness of you

That we are come to that  
Between us here to know  
Things in the perfect way (27)

This poem—discrete and isolated at the center of empty page-space, intimately expressive but stuttered and elusive—is a very distinct “kind of ruin.” In this poem and all small poems, the “textual self-referentiality” in operation is pronounced in a very particular way (as page-determined, centripetal solidifying of each discrete text); and the effect of conveying a sharp, reproachful sense of “transitoriness and ephemerality” is amplified in small poems. Small poems like the one above may seem to claim the “political non-availability” Oppen speaks of as the poet’s province (“The Mind’s Own Place” 182), yet they do accrue a political value in their

sharp renunciation of “progress and permanence,” their flagrant willingness to appear trivial and weak while cannily interrupting or dismantling staid conventions.

## Conclusion

A passage in Howe’s introductory essay in *Souls of the Labadie Tract* serves as a helpful complement to the above passage from Davidson:

Each page is both picture and nonsense soliloquy replete with transgressive nudges. It’s a vocalized wilderness format of slippage and misshapen dream projection. Lots of blank space is essential to acoustically locate each dead center phoneme and allophone tangle somewhere between low comedy and lyric sanctity. (*SLT* 17-18)

These three sentences constitute a miniature manifesto for Howe’s “splintered sketches of sound” and for almost all small poetics. She calls direct attention to the discreteness of pages and the role of surrounding “blank space”; she notes the indissoluble tension between representation (“picture”) and musical or tangible sensuousness (“nonsense”) that can exist in written language; the mention of “transgressive nudges” and “wilderness” connote her antinomian allegiances; “tangle” calls to mind Peirce’s “snarl of twine” and threads or vines on a lattice; we hear in “slippage” both the indeterminacies of verbal signification and, perhaps, a diligent use of actual scraps and slips; and the final term “lyric sanctity” signals the affirmative, aesthetic, even mystical heart of Howe’s poetics.

Susan Howe is, after all, finally on the side of the lyric, though I have avoided that term. In an interview in 1990, she candidly confesses: “I think the lyric poem is a most compressed and lovely thing. I guess it’s the highest form” (*TB* 171). And seventeen years later, in *Souls*, she

still holds the same view, implicit in her declaration that “Poetry is love for the felt fact stated in sharpest, most agile and detailed lyric terms (*SLT* 9). Rachel Blau DuPlessis corroborates this affinity, aptly illustrating Howe’s relation to the tradition:

Howe makes works which seem to distill the quintessence of traditional lyric poetry, its luminous greeny white sap-filled songs. This essence she tests and recreates by projecting the lyric into the hardly populated vastness and silence of modern page space. (DuPlessis, “Howe” 125)

Howe’s allegiance to the lyric is unequivocal, and it is perhaps the key fact that ties together her works’ tendencies toward violence, reality, and the metaphysical.

Any small poem on a page acutely figures the condition of every discrete person—the plight of being small and thus utterly subject to forces of reality and history. This condition—the person who is buffeted but somehow endures—lies at the root of lyric poetry. The explicit or implicit violence in Howe’s poems evinces this plight: the stuttering and laconic-ness, the general sense of constructed “ruins.” Howe says Dickinson “Adopted parataxis and rupture to tell the feverish haste, the loss, to warn of storm approaching—Brute force, mechanism,” and Howe’s does something quite similar, on all counts (*MED* 116).

There would be nothing at stake, no real “loss” or “feverish haste,” if small poems did not convey the sense that impinging forces were real, were part of some sort of enveloping reality. Howe takes a matter-of-fact stance, not mincing words or trying to explain:

EF: Then you feel history is an actuality?

SH: Yes.

EF: Against which the writer is working?

SH: In and against. (*TB* 158-9)

Of course Howe is not a realist in any absolute sense, but she has a deep-seated inclination in this direction (“I’m only a gentle reader trying to be a realist” [TM 61]). Her small-poem lyrics are all inscribed on historical backdrops, with an air of actuality, consequence, and participation. The real existence of the Labadist community in Maryland—the fact of their courageous but transient, forgotten experiment—is inseparable from the poignancy and force of the book’s “significant little wrecks” (the same is true of the facts pertaining to Jonathan Edwards and Wallace Stevens included in the book).

Howe’s inclination towards realism, though, is not just a matter of harsh historical impingement and knowable facts. It also, perhaps most fully, takes form as an abiding desire for reality, a hopeful belief that we can at least approach it in some way. She writes in *Souls of the Labadie Tract* of having “a sense of the parallel between our always fragmentary knowledge and the continual progress toward perfect understanding that never withers away” (SLT 14). The two elements mentioned are parallel, thus in perpetual tension; “continual progress” does not supersede the fact of “our always fragmentary knowledge.” We move toward perfect understanding or knowledge of reality—what others, including Oppen, have called *truth*—with motives and movements that endure, but such perfect knowledge or truth is never fully achieved, even in fragmentary form.<sup>146</sup> Yet Howe does hold onto the idea of some kind of un-

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<sup>146</sup> The conception Howe invokes here bears a remarkable resonance with Charles Sanders Peirce’s explanation of reality, that is, not an assertion of what reality “is,” but an explanation of the concept, of what we *mean* by “the real.” It is the latter half of the passage that Howe’s statement echoes:

And what do we mean by the real? It is a conception which we must first have had when we discovered that there was an unreal, an illusion; that is, when we first corrected ourselves. Now the distinction for which alone this fact logically called, was between an *ens* relative to private inward determinations, to the negations belonging to idiosyncrasy, and an *ens* such as would stand in the long run. The real then, is that which, sooner or later, information and reasoning would finally result in, and which is therefore independent of the vagaries of me and you. Thus, the very origin of the conception of reality shows that this conception essentially involves the notion of COMMUNITY, without definite limits, and capable of a definite increase of knowledge. (CP 5.311-312)

withering, continual progress, an approach that is itself meaningful; there is an almost metaphysical or mystical cast to this view. The small poems in *Souls*, for instance, do not provide tidy nuggets of real knowledge or even coherent lyrical epiphanies. Instead, their spare shaped forms and stuttered voicings illustrate the lyric condition of *having* fragmentary knowledge but *reaching towards* perfect understanding or reality. In a short prose piece called “In the Mountains,” Paul Celan writes of a poet’s potential orientation to the world as “wounded by and seeking reality” (*Selected Poetry and Prose*). This phrase precisely characterizes what Howe’s poems present and enact. Like Celan, she also is a poet of witness *and* vision, a writer for whom language can carry emblematic marks or markers (wounds) of the real; words must be sifted, transmuted, and illuminated through the activity of writing, in order to have any chance of bearing meaningful witness. Howe’s archive-infused spare assemblages record the impingement of a wounding reality, that is, the “actuality” of history “in and against” which she speaks of working.

Another way of characterizing the putative realism of Howe’s small poems is through metaphysical or religious terms, a frame that does, after all, align with antinomianism and typology. In effect, her use of language and form and her deep investment in relations evince an ontology of immanence, the idea that meanings inhere in the actual substance and surfaces of things, not beyond them. This is essentially a form of realist mysticism, though of the earth-bound and phenomenological sort. Sustained acquaintance with and good faith investigation of something—whether a tree, person, poetic text, or archive—can begin to yield significant knowledge of that thing, not because of mere rational analysis that a mind has projected but because, in a sense, the thing *exudes* the meanings that are bound up with its strict particularity, its actual material existence. Susan Howe’s writings, no matter how splintered or inscrutable

they might appear, intimate the existence of an immediate, accessible vitality in words and in the things words denote and connote. Ultimately, her use of scraps, grids, and slips—which draw our attention in complex and forceful ways—constitute a kind of realist sign-language. Peter Quartermain’s essay on Howe in *Disjunctive Poetics* ends with a provocative passage that asserts just such an ontology of immanence, and tacitly conveys, in his final sentence, the vital correlation between small-poem form and a quasi-religious realism:

Her writing is essentially religious, devoted to a lively apprehension of the sacramental nature of our experience of the world, and of the sacramental nature of the world. Like Emily Dickinson she is an utterly astringent formalist. (Quartermain, *Disjunctive* 194).

**Epilogue:**  
**“Up Against Bounty and Figured Human”:**  
**Myung Mi Kim and Present-Day Small Poetics**

Artistic symbols, on the other hand, are untranslatable: their sense is bound to the particular form which it has taken. It is always *implicit*, and cannot be explicated by any interpretation. This is true even of poetry, for though the *material* of poetry is verbal, its import is not the literal assertion made in the words, but *the way the assertion is made*,  
 (Susanne Langer 261)

...the imagination itself has come up against barriers of an  
 unprecedented kind. The experience of silence in the face of the  
 unspeakable is one of them... (Hamburger 239)

[h]

Enter port enter massacre backs of pick axes swing

Parts to whole dirt to water

Austere harrow thought (Kim, *The Bounty* 30)

“Where do we find ourselves?” asks Emerson, famously, at the outset of his essay “Experience,” and then answers himself: “In a series of which we do not know the extremes, because we believe it has none” (*EL* 471). Emerson asks an always-critical question, especially in its particular second-person plural form; it emphasizes the irreducible subjective reality of existence while yet invoking some definite community—“we”—that is also implicitly irreducible. Yet Emerson’s answer answers nothing, instead clarifying the terms of the question: “where” is not mainly a question of place but of “when,” of time; “finding,” locating or understanding, ourselves is a function of how our *lack* of knowledge intersects our inevitable, survivalist beliefs in openness and illimitable possibility. The question, then, at any given time or place, vis-à-vis “ourselves” or any given thing, is really “*how* might we understand the form and significance of an existent thing as it shuttles, evolving, through time and space?”

Thus we, whose attention here is turned to a putative type of writing, might ask: where, in North America in 2011, do we find the state of something called small poetry? We find it in connection to certain persons and we also find it in a certain way or condition. New

circumstances of overload and collision that we currently face—unrelieved technological exposure and global war, to name only two of the more formidable ones—exert so many particular pressures of reality, new “violences without” that beg the question of what sort of small poetics are presently in evidence, enacting their distinct forms of resistance and response, their types of “violence within.” Susan Howe, of course, is still writing, but several other poets working today, all of them younger than Howe, also demand attention for their small poems. These works are amply visible, but, as regards the question of the form’s *state*, we find small poems today still negotiating the tensions that have hovered around “lyric poetry” since at least 1931 (when “Objectivist” poetry coalesced), if not the turn of the twentieth century.

These anxieties—about the deceptions and dangers of beauty, the indulging and reinforcing of the illusory ego, the commodification of discrete artifacts, and the tacitly legislative notions about what constitutes a legitimate, meaningful, coherent, and revelatory poetic voice—have greatly intensified through the decades leading up to the present moment. Many approaches to experimental writing, Language Poetry foremost among them, have striven to expose and supplant these “outworn” ideas, but the predominant method here has been, as Susan Shultz puts it, to “attempt to cure language by using a lot of it” (215). Also, among experimental poets of any stripe, there has been an evident tendency, in practice and in tone, towards stridency, towards the sort of truculence from which Susan Howe speaks of exempting herself.<sup>147</sup>

There are several other noteworthy small poets currently working who enact similar sorts of self-exemption and reserve, who choose to enunciate in compellingly laconic rather than

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<sup>147</sup> “[W]hen articles are written about Language Poetry or when fights between the various covens occur, it’s usually men who do the writing and the fighting...And the endless name dropping, the repetition of the same names over and over, is at some level anathema to what poetry taps or interprets anyway. Maybe there is in silence a far greater mystery. Maybe anger is a waste. First I wanted to fight, but now I think it’s more important to just keep writing poems” (*TB* 169).

vociferous writing voices—practices that coincide with their persistently spare textual forms.<sup>148</sup> Rae Armantrout, already so important to this discussion for the formulations and stance of her “Poetic Silence” talk, stands out. Her first book, the well-named *Extremities*, was published in 1978, and her consistently spare, fragmented, penetrating free verse has continued to appear since then (eventuating in the recent triumph of receiving the Pulitzer Prize for her 2009 book *Versed*). Several younger poets, like Chris Vitiello, Graham Foust, and Laura Sims, are steadily building striking bodies of respectively small writings. Complementing these are many older poets of the more minimal scale, like Yuko Otomo, who has worked diligently in this mode for several decades, holding purposely to quieter margins. Her 2005 book *Small Poems* is, unsurprisingly, an epitome of small poetry. Not only is it the only book of poems I know of with this simple but claim-staking title, but it happens to accord with every key criterion I have elaborated for the category: a mere four inches by six inches in size; only 33 total poems; each poem a discrete work centered in its own page (and with no printing on the verso sides); all pieces consisting of few words constructed in various fractured, free-verse forms that draw attention to lines and line breaks.

All of these and many others besides (both poets, as well as many scattered discrete instances—books and individual poems), are signs that small poetry in America is alive and actively holding its ground. The most illustrious and coherent particular sign, though, the person I have chosen as my fourth prime exemplar of small poetry in twentieth century America, is Myung Mi Kim. Her poetry over the past two decades demonstrates a formal and cultural commitment to small, “wrecked” forms and significances that is more rigorous and more full-fledged than any of her contemporaries.<sup>7</sup> Like Susan Howe and Rae Armantrout, Kim

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<sup>148</sup> I do not mean to discount the various commitments to activism taken by many small poets, but rather to credit certain writers’ commitments to embody such a position in more unaffiliated ways, and in what Myung Mi Kim calls an attitude of “generosity” as against one of vehemence and contempt.

has maintained a shrewd reserve and independence in spite of some associations with Language Poetry. Through five major volumes she has elaborated an articulately austere poetry in which particulate words and phrases—drawn scrupulously from a range of lexicons: colloquial, technical, military, linguistic, and agricultural—are meshed and arranged into page-based assemblages, like this pair from Kim’s first book:

“In my country” preface to the immigrant’s fallow  
 Field my country ash in water follow  
 Descent slur vowel  
  
 Stricken buoys  
 Span no tongue and mouth  
 Scripting, hand flat against the mouth

Up against bounty and figured human  
 allaying surge  
 neighboring  
  
 Geographical trodden shelter  
 Locate deciphering  
 by force  
  
 As contour  
 Hurls  
 ga ga ga ga

(*Under Flag* 26-27)

As she puts in one of two brief poetics statements, “The book emerges through cycles of erosion and accretion” (*C* 108), and indeed every one of Kim’s books exhibits the effects of such forces textually. The poems above are prime examples of this; they appear constructed and worn in equal measure. The text on the left compiles vivid phrases—“the immigrant’s fallow /Field,” “my country ash in water,” and “hand flat against the mouth”; these are portentous yet legible images, when considered discretely. The text also shows an accretion of sonic textures—

repetitions, near-rhymes, assonance, and consonance—that are intensified in the visible line beginnings and endings: “fallow...follow...vowel,” “Stricken...Span...Scripting,” and “mouth...mouth,” for example. These latter prosodic and material features of the poem, together with its semantically charged phrases, give a sense of accumulated, shaped meanings. The two left-aligned tercets are plainly formed from a build-up of words. Nonetheless, the text also shows signs of erosion. Problems of exile and communication are evinced in the sparseness of the lines; the spaces between and around them, even between certain words, as in

Descent   slur   vowel

are charged silences. Moreover, the apparent wearing or washing away of punctuation and the fracture of enjambed line breaks distorts any definitive, integrative reading of the text. The conflated difficulties of speaking, writing, and surviving are exhibited in the way written words and phrases are arranged in page-space. Thus, the meshed-together language in this poem, as in all of Kim’s poems, materially foregrounds the very sort of oxymoronic tensions often denoted in her phrases: “slur vowels,” “Stricken buoys,” and a “mouth / Scripting.”

The poem on the right side of the page above, its lines more vividly fractured than the first poem’s, perhaps accomplishes such accretion-erosion even more potently, not only in its text-form but in its semantics. The poem ends with “hurling” of mere phonemes, the infantile and possibly distressed stutter of “ga ga ga ga.” Sense here has been eroded or stifled (a “hand flat against the mouth,” perhaps). But this is not just an arbitrary breakdown of language or a winking effort to expose the impoverishments of verbal meaning itself. It falls under a kind of heading. The first line of the poem (as well as the poem to the left and all the other accompanying texts in *Under Flag*) makes clear the larger context and *stakes* of such troubled, spare language: “Up against bounty and figured human.” This line—like an epochal motto—

articulates the emblematic dimension of small poetry in the most precise, evocative, and concise terms I have yet encountered.

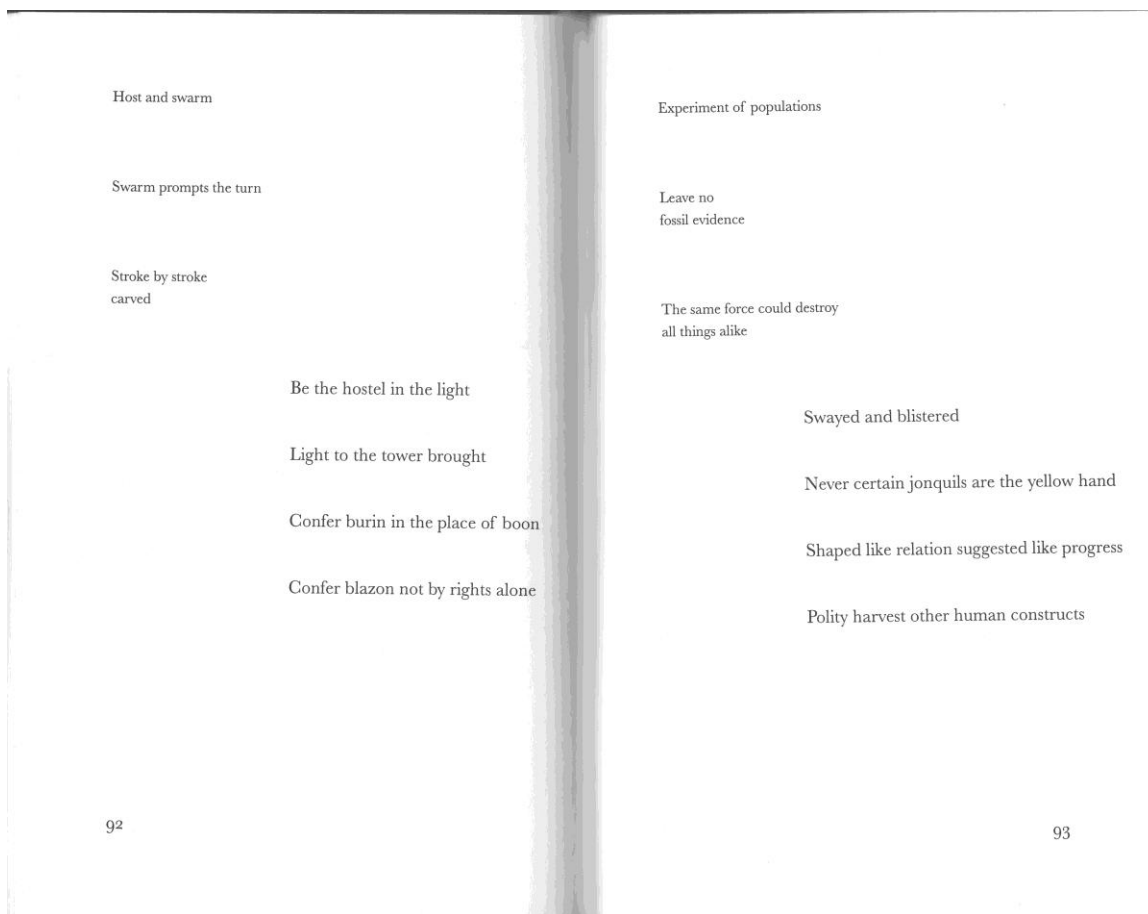
Kim extends and corroborates this notion of text-making (and, implicitly, text-meaning), when she writes that, like each book, each poem takes form in piecemeal fashion, “by fragment, by increment...Through proposition, parataxis, contingency” (C 108). They are texts in and by which “The inchoate and the concrete coincide” (108)—an apt, succinct expression of the carefully formed coarseness so vital to small poetry. In fact, the very titles of Kim’s books—*Under Flag*, *Dura*, *The Bounty*, *Commons*, and *Penury*—constellate a forceful syllabus of small-poem concerns. Her elegantly austere poems themselves, together with her few extra-poetic works (two brief poetics statements and several interviews), serve to illuminate powerfully the principal facets of small poetry: the central significance of form; a keen attention to violence and disruption in the world and in language; textuality hinging on the use of discrete page-spaces; a determination to document reality in some way; and the conviction that small writings exert an effective, generative counterforce against rationalist myths of expansion and control, what Michael Davidson calls simply, “the illusion of progress and permanence” (*Ghostlier Demarcations* 3).

Kim’s poetry has strong correspondences to all of the small poetries considered in this study (and her work most resembles that of her contemporary Susan Howe’s, although it is Howe’s polymorphous, more splintered, pre-lattice-glyph books that best make the analogy); but it also stands quite apart. Her poetics incorporates violence, history, language, and politics in ways not quite preceded in this minimalist company. In one sense, these incorporations are attuned to the experiences of immigrants, especially those involving fraught linguistic and cultural assimilation. But Kim’s poems are not at all limited to this context; the immigrant

struggles connoted are real but also representative, more pronounced versions of crises on continua to which all Americans are tied in some way.

We might say that Myung Mi Kim's restless, precise, vigilant, continually shape-shifting small poetics devotes itself to charting *morphology* and *provision*, as they do or do not intersect, across linguistic and material landscapes. Literally and simply, morphology means the study of any forms, but it also has several compelling technical meanings. In linguistics, morphology involves the analysis of morphemes and any other units of meaning, and in biology, it is the study of the forms and structures of organisms. The latter brings us directly into questions of provision, as in, a supply of some kind, or the preparations and arrangements necessary for supplying something. This concept is also eloquently expressed in the Greek word *bios*, the word for "life" that pertains to daily, material subsistence, most simply, "that by which life is sustained." Provision and *bios* also bring to mind the Latin *cultus* (the root of both culture and cultivate), whose meaning entails both "tilling" or "refinement" and also "habitation." This concept thus ties provision back to the biological notion of morphology.

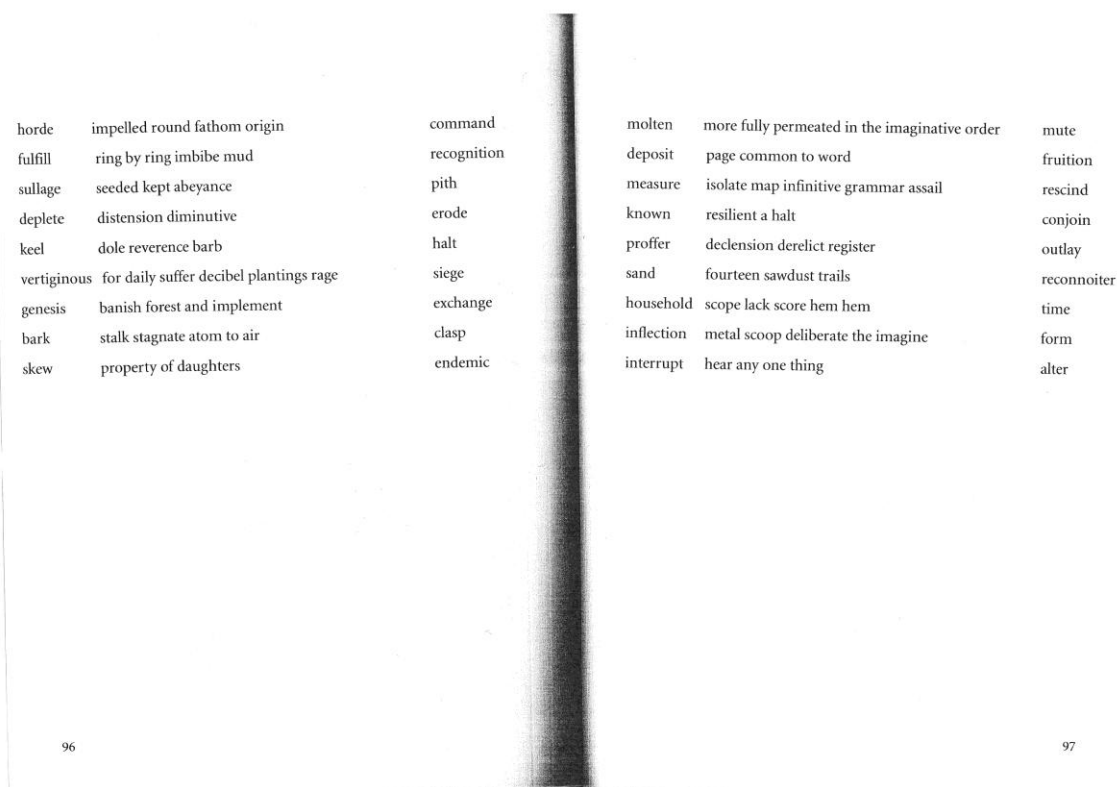
These concerns, with all of their manifold shadings, are salient in Kim's work. Her sequenced arrays of spare forms—within which vocabularies commingle and "bare lists of words" (Emerson, qtd. in Howe, *PA* 14; *TM* 46) alternate with poignant speech acts or dry, flat statements—dramatize the way human beings scatter, gather, and interpret forms, both physical and verbal, in efforts to survive and find significance. Two pages from the book *Dura* demonstrate how such textual dramatization is accomplished in page-space:



(*Dura* 92-93)

Running through Kim's poetry are threads of soft and hard materials, bodies and machines, lyrical portents and blind systems. Indeed, as Ammiel Alcalay asserts, "Her work manifests the power of poetry's undeniably ancient force as chronicle and political document...a poetics which resists being neutralized or categorized." This assiduous documentary practice is certainly what gives foundation to Kim's "realist" bent, but, combined with the acute sparseness and disjunctiveness of her lines, it is also what has made Kim's work seem obscure or difficult for some. Critic Warren Liu, in "Myung Mi Kim's Ideal Subject," posits that "One salient feature of Myung Mi Kim's poetry that general readers and academics alike agree upon is its

intense and at times unrelenting opacity” (252). These two texts from *The Bounty* give a better idea than the poems included thus far of the occasions Liu indicates:



(*The Bounty* 96-97)

I also agree that “at times,” as with the pages above, Kim’s texts can manifest a powerful resistance to interpretation, but the great risk in a charge like this—“opacity”—is its tendency to stigmatize unjustly an entire body of work. In fact, underneath the spartan and heterogeneous surfaces of Kim’s charts or “chronicles,” an attentive reader will readily hear the murmuring sound of the basic human need to speak, that is, to make sense, to tell, to relate, to belong. This persistent human presence is what gives heft and import to what we might call Kim’s small-poem realism.

Kim's small poetics, at root and heart, aims "To give form to what is remote, castigated" (C 110). She elaborates on this mission in a stunning passage prompted by a consideration of poets Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Paul Celan:

With these writers we are in the company of language that has been met with potential erasure; what happens in that kind of collaboration between the impossibility of utterance and finding the means by which to utter? That space is never a decided, resolved, fixed point, and part of the exquisiteness is that it is constantly in motion, constantly reshaping itself. I suppose any poem is that, and really is always on the cusp of coming into legibility—formally, psychically, politically. For me those works that keep *re-invigorating that space of silence and erasure*, the space of the seemingly untranslatable, are the ones in which you really feel some sort of endurance and power. ("Generosity As Method," emphasis added)

Myung Mi Kim's poetry also, in its tenacious smallness, its "negativity and commitment" (DuPlessis), "re-invigorates that space of silence and erasure." This practice, like all fully formed small poetics, has both a critical, challenging value as well as a generative, affirming one. Kim aspires to texts that will "Counter the potential totalizing power of language that serves the prevailing systems and demands of coherence" (C 110), but she also hopes to "Enter language as it factors in, layers in, and crosses fields of meaning, *elaborating and extending the possibilities for sense making*" (110).<sup>149</sup> The first of these may seem in some way opposed to the second, and may

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<sup>149</sup> Compare Kim's phrase to art historian George Kubler's at the end of this seminal passage from *The Shape of Time*:

How does artistic invention differ from useful invention? It differs as human sensibility differs from the rest of the universe. Artistic inventions alter the sensibility of mankind. They all emerge from and return to human perception, unlike useful inventions, which are keyed to the physical and biological environment...artistic inventions enlarge human awareness directly with new ways of experiencing the universe, rather than with new objective interpretations...they have no therapeutic or explanatory purpose; they only *expand the range of human perceptions by enlarging the channels of emotional discourse* (Kubler 65-66, emphasis added).

also seem the more political thesis, but in fact that “countering”—if undertaken with the “generosity” that Kim espouses and evinces—can itself become an elaboration and extension of sense-making possibilities; and that prospect has and always will have a radical political and cultural power.

Myung Mi Kim’s writing, in its confrontation with “the unspeakable” and also enunciative possibilities, constitutes a poetics of radical witness that intervenes, invites, and challenges; it calls on every reader to grapple with both the antagonisms and the pleasures that are embedded in the English language. Kim’s forms and practices bring together all of the crucial valences and forces of small poetics, recollecting the work of poets like Niedecker, Oppen, and Howe and also breaking new ground, envisaging more ramified possibilities for how this kind of writing might give shape to the “unbearable and exquisite” facts of the ongoing American experiment.

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